

魔王の俺が 奴隸エルフを 嫁にしたんだが、 どう愛でればいい?

1

手島史詞

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ILL. COMTA

I, the Demon Lord, Took a Slave Elf as my Wife, but how do I Love Her?

vol.1

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Novel Updates

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*Beneath it was a
lovely girl with
long, pointed ears.*

Zagan looked into the girl's eyes and felt his heart quiver, and felt something run through his body from the tips of his toes to the crown of his head.

I Demon
, a Lord, took a
Slave Elf
as my Wife, but,
how do I Love Her?





轟音と共に、石壁が砕け散った。
土煙の中からその男はゆっくりと現れた。

「お前、ネフイに怪我をさせたな？」

Prologue

“What should I do in this situation...!”

Zagan was in a predicament. He was within his own castle, the floors were aged oak, and the walls were constructed of moss-covered, stone blocks. The carpet and wall decorations distracted from it, but he had essentially left it completely unmaintained.

At least two hundred years had probably passed since its construction, it was an abandoned castle enveloped in an aura of melancholy.

Standing stock-still in front of Zagan, who was reclining on the castle’s throne with his legs crossed, was a single girl.

The first thing to catch the eye was her snow-white hair that reached her waist, and then the crimson ribbon that decorated her hair. The eyes on her delicate face were an azure as deep as the summer skies, and her lips were an unassuming mild peach colour.

Covering her dainty limbs was a pure white dress, and the open front gave a glimpse at two large bulges that were at odds with her slight build.

However, her eyes were awfully empty, and her ears tapered to a sharp point. She was a member of the race that had been called ‘the Faeries of Norden’ in ancient times — Elves. In particular, those that had white hair were rare, and said to be particularly strong.

They were closer to god than humans were, but that holiness itself meant that they were often targeted by humans. A single strand of their hair, a single drop of blood from them, even their life itself, held unfathomable power as magic reagents. Around that ephemeral and mysterious girl’s neck, was a thick collar with a chain attached.

A slave collar.

And, it was this girl’s existence that was causing Zagan’s distress.

“How should I talk to the girl I like...!”

Several hours ago, he had fallen for the girl at first sight, and had been glad to buy her body, but he had had very few chances to speak with a girl of her age before. He hadn't the faintest clue how to draw her interest.

The girl herself had been bought as a slave, was she nervous? Her expression was stiff, and it would be no exaggeration to call her expressionless. He couldn't just stay silent, he had to say something.

Words appeared in his mind.

'The weather is nice, isn't it?'

"...No, that's not it. That's not it."

The room had no windows, and if you were to look up to the ceiling, you'd see the rusted chains hanging from implements of torture. Besides, it was cloudy outside the last he knew.

No matter how he looked at it, that wasn't it, but then what should he say?

'What do you think of this castle?'

"Calm down. This is an abandoned castle, with corpses and magic tools scattered around, right?"

He couldn't think of any response other than something like 'a place of execution' or 'hell'. That said, he regretted not even tidying up a little before bringing her here.

Approximately an hour had passed like this. The one to open their mouth first was not Zagan.

"Master. May I... ask a question?"

A pleasant, bell-like voice rang out softly.

"...What?"

Zagan threw his head into his hands at his blunt response.

"That sounds like I'm irritated at her, doesn't it!?"

Even though the girl had spoken to him. Whilst Zagan collapsed in despair, the girl spoke emotionlessly, and said this.

"How... will you be killing me?"

Zagan's mouth dropped open in shock.

"Wait a minute! Why am I killing you!?"

"Eh... You're... not?"

So saying, the girl's eyes rose to look at the things hanging from the walls and ceiling.

Bloodstained saws, caskets lined with long needles, various sized scissors, and other such wicked looking instruments furnished them like decorations. They were implements of torture, leftovers from the previous owner of the castle.

"And earlier, there were the corpses of this morning's intruders still in the entryway. That was probably scary..."

Thinking back on it, he had the impression that her body had stiffened upon seeing those corpses — corpses that had had their heads blown off. If there was a mage that brought a girl to an unpleasant place like this and proclaimed 'I am a gentleman, there is no need to be afraid', Zagan would have beaten the hell out of them.

Cold sweat trickled down his back. Zagan could make no excuses to the girl whose eyes seemed to have lost all hope.

This had all started that morning.

Chapter 1 — First Love is a Nasty Illness That Afflicts Us All

Shortly after dawn, a shrill shriek pierced the forest.

The foliage of the dense trees spread out like a ceiling, blocking out the sun's rays. It was a place called things like the 'Forest of the Lost'. In the centre of this forest lay an old, abandoned castle, covered in vines, and it was rumoured that the deceased, demons, and mages resided within.

Zagan walked through that eerie forest. He was a youth that would turn eighteen this year, with black hair and silver eyes. He had a handsome face and wore a black robe that was lined with red fabric. If he wore a neater outfit, he might have been able to call himself a noble from somewhere.

"Please, stop, Maias! Come to your senses..."

A woman could be seen, being restrained by a man that looked like a knight. The woman was still young, probably young enough to still be called a girl. She had beautiful hair like burnished copper, and deep, blue eyes, with ethereal, pale white skin. From the smooth curve of the bridge of her nose, she seemed to have the refined grace of a noble, but the tomboyish impression she gave was even stronger than that.

However, even that lively face was currently twisted in fear.

They could have been a young nobleman's daughter and her knight escort, thought Zagan as he walked nonchalantly towards them. As he did, the girl was fighting the man fiercely, clawing at his face.

"Hch—"

However, the one to pale was not the man. The man's face peeled smoothly off with the girl's scratch. The skin was torn off, and blood mixed with chunks of meat fell to the floor in drops.

"Heee—"

The girl let out a strangled shriek at the gruesome sight. Underneath the skin

that had come off, there was no face. The man's ear and nose had been torn off, and it was misshapen, the cheekbones broken.

The man's a mage then, huh.

Zagan knew this was the price of magic.

With that grotesque face in such proximity, the poor girl trembled badly. The man drew a knife from his waist, letting it slide above her chest as if he were stroking her.

The shirt fluttered to the ground as she whimpered wordlessly, it wasn't hard to imagine what awaited her.

The man laughed at the girl, unable to speak from shame and fear.

"Haha, that's a pretty arousin' face there. Sorry to disappoint, but I ain't gonna rape you like yer hoping. Virgins are pretty valuable to mages, y'see."

I won't be defiled.

The girl's face was tinged with relief for a moment at the man's words, but, the girl didn't know.

That she would meet an even more horrifying fate than defilement.

"Skin peeled from a living virgin's face makes a good cat'lyst. Don't just die on me, 'kay?"

The discarded flesh on the floor was reflected in her eyes.

"N-no-NOOOOOOO!"

The man smiled even wider, as if the screaming girl raised his spirits.

"An' y'see, skinning good lookin' girls like you is person'lly satisyin'. Once I'm done with yer face, I'll take
good

care of yer body, so don'chu worry. Hihyahyahya."

Just as Zagan arrived behind him, he grabbed the man's head in a claw-like grip and yanked him up with one hand.

"H-huh...?" The knife he was pressing into the girl's cheek moved away, and

the man gave a dimwitted exclamation, “W-who the hell are you!?”

He had had enough of the angry voice of the man that didn’t seem to understand the situation he was in.

“No, who are you? I don’t care if it’s rape or torture, but causing a ruckus in someone’s garden when they’re sleeping is going to wake them up.”

A nuisance in the night, let alone the man, the girl was astounded at the words which held no hint of compassion or moral outrage.

The forest around the abandoned castle was Zagan’s territory, and simultaneously, no one could win against him here.

A mage could probably understand that, and the man threw the knife away and raised his hands.

“W-wait! Yer a mage too, right? Killin’ me doesn’t help you, if you overlook this, I’ll share my research!”

He was begging for his life, and on top of that, it was on the order of surrendering his fortune. For mages, their individual research was their power, because obtaining knowledge would allow many magics to be used. Despite this, Zagan glared at the man suspiciously and spat.

“Magic that needs to skin people... don’t want it.”

Immediately afterwards, the man’s head was crushed like a fruit.

“...Ah, whoops.”

The man was straddling the girl, so because his head had been crushed, the chunks of meat and blood rained down upon the girl. Covered in blood, the girl fainted, and would probably have one or two psychological wounds if she awoke.

Naturally, guilt welled in Zagan’s chest at treating a young girl like this.

C-calm down. I’m a mage, I can change something like this back right away.

If there was no blood, the girl might be able to be convinced it was all a dream and forget about it. Zagan took a calming breath and twirled his raised index finger.

"Surging Ring."

With that chant, a large ring spread out on the ground. A magic circle of delicate characters and diagrams. As if time was rewinding, the viscera separated from the girl and gathered at the man's corpse, along with the gore sticking to Zagan's hand.

This was magic.

Magic was generally performed by drawing magic circles. Within these figures, the laws of physics could be ignored, and phenomena enacted as a mage wished. Through devising those processes and structures, differences in individual strength became apparent.

Spells put that meaning into words, and bypassed the time to draw the magic circle, but they were fundamentally the same thing.

Naturally, the magic was just to move things, so while the accumulated viscera was gathered into the shape of the missing head, it soon fell apart. Regardless, the girl had been restored, even down to her torn clothes; looking at her face once again, Zagan let out a deep sigh.

She's beautiful.

He then noticed a pendant around the girl's neck.

"...A cross — is she from the church?"

The church loathed mages, and were followers of a self-proclaimed god. And they maintained that justice with Holy Knights.

A knight was ordinarily a distinguished soldier who offered their loyalty to a monarch, but they couldn't stand against mages. However, the church had miracles from god that allowed them to do so. The monarch's knights were not the ones that marched to battle with mages, it was the Church's Holy Knights. In other words, they were long-standing foes of mages.

What do I do, I get the feeling they'll think I did it...

Zagan had more or less helped the girl, but from their point of view, it'd probably look like the evil mages had fought amongst themselves. And on top of that, he'd doused her in blood.

It might still be difficult to resolve the misunderstanding even if the girl awoke. However, killing the girl that he had saved, after a fashion, would leave a bad aftertaste.

“...Well, I guess it’s fine.”

After worrying a little, Zagan decided to abandon her outside. Someone would probably find her if he left her on the main road out of the forest. If she was found by a thug that would add to the unconscious girl’s wounds, that was her bad luck. He didn’t feel any duty to go so far as to look after her.

Lightly stamping his heel into the ground, another circle, different than before, was drawn out underneath her. It was a magic circle of transfer that connected the interior and exterior of his territory. However, before the girl was transferred, something came from the circle’s destination.

“Hm?”

Zagan’s eyes opened wide.

Someone usurped my circle?

This was within his territory. In case of intruders like this, Zagan had practically covered his castle and its lands in magic circles. They were bounded fields. A field to alert to intruders, a field to halt them, a field to weaken other mages’ strength, and a field to strengthen his own. In other words, the area was advantageous to Zagan in all things.

And thus, usurping the circle was not a feat that could be accomplished by an average mage. It was an unusually skilled intruder, but Zagan’s reaction was carefree.

“Don’t just use people’s circles, Barbarus.”

The one that appeared was a lanky youth. He was probably around twenty, two years older than Zagan. However, his cheeks were sunken, and black rings surrounded his eyes. He was wearing a hooded robe, and several amulets around his neck. It was obvious from the fact he breached Zagan’s bounded fields that he had an extraordinary amount of power.

“Yo, Zagan. Ya look as unhealthy as always.”

"You're the one that looks unhealthy, Barbarus."



Of all the mages in the world, the only one that would intrude so brazenly

upon Zagan's territory was Barbarus. He was Zagan's sole partner in crime.

"And again, don't just use people's circles."

"If I didn't, I couldn't have used it to come here, could I?"

Magic circles were a mage's strength. He had overwritten Zagan's circle with his own and used it to invade, which was easier said than done. Even though the area was advantageous for Zagan, it was doubtful he would win if they fought directly. He was that kind of mage.

Barbarus gazed at the unconscious girl and the corpse that still lay on the floor, and his eyes closed into a smile.

"My, did I crash a party?"

"It's just a little punishment for a villain getting carried away in someone's garden."

"Heehee, coming from you."

The creatures known as mages were, without exception, villains. Their concern was strengthening themselves, others' lives and fortunes were negligible in comparison. If they felt it necessary, they would steal without an ounce of guilt.

Even Zagan saving the girl earlier wasn't due to morals, but was a simple matter of disinterest. Barbarus stared at her.

"Well now, this girl has a fair amount of magic, doesn't she? Going to use her as a sacrifice?"

"Sacrificial magic isn't my thing."

So saying, he stamped his heel into the ground once more. The girl's body was covered in a pale light, and vanished. This time, she had been sent to outside Zagan's territory.

"What a waste, you could have given her to me if you didn't want her."

"Don't kidnap people from others' territories. I'd get treated like the culprit."

"Heehee, that'd be good, let's go with that next time."

"...In that case, I'd send your base flying, you know?"

Zagan glared dangerously at him, because he was just the type to actually do it. However, that too was only for a few seconds, before he grew tired of glaring.

“Oi oi, what you looking so sleepy for?”

“I stayed up all night reading a grimoire. I’m going to sleep, if you need anything, come back later.”

“Hah, if you’re sleepy, a little shot of adrenalin will wake you right up, yeah? Don’t be so cold after I’ve come out of my way to visit.”

“It’s because you do that kind of stuff that you look so unhealthy.”

Mages were those that spent their lives researching magic, aiming to overcome humanity. To research magic, one had to live. So mages first learnt how to operate their body. Not just the application of physical movements, magic to control the body on the cellular level was the basics of magic. Therefore, mages were beyond illness, and even a natural lifespan. It was at reaching that level that one could call themselves a mage.

Even so, they would waste away without food and water, they could manipulate the need for sleep, but not eliminate it. It was this that had lead to Barbarus’ appearance now, so Zagan didn’t particularly wish to use that kind of magic too much.

Barbarus gave a strange laugh.

“Don’t say that, I’ve got something interesting to tell you.”

With a relatively wicked face, Barbarus threw a friendly arm around Zagan’s shoulders.

“Something interesting?”

Jostling his irritating friend’s arm, Zagan asked in return. A smile found its way onto Barbarus’ sunken face.

“That’s right. You know that one of the Demon Lords, Marchosias, fell?”

At that name, even Zagan’s eyes opened wide.

‘Demon Lord’ didn’t refer to the king of demons, spoken of in stories. It was a

name given to those lords that reached the very pinnacle of magic.

Along with that title, they were given vast amounts of magic, and could take other, low-level mages as servants. If mages desired power and influence, then this would be the pinnacle. There were normally thirteen, but one amongst them had finally breathed his last at a thousand years of age. Mages held off their lifespan, but it seemed that that still had its limits after a thousand years. Hearing about that Demon Lord, even Zagan couldn't ignore it.

"Oh? My my, isn't that a curious face? Ah, wait, didn't you say you wanted to sleep? Ahhh, what a shame that it's not something interesting enough to be worth earning your enmity."

"Quit making a show of it and speak already."

"...As rude as always." Spoke Barbarus with a sigh of irritation. "There's that city, Kianoides, right? Marchosias made his territory there, but there's a huge auction there. From proper things to the things we like, it's all there."

"It can't be..."

A gulp came from his throat.

"It is! This is it, the Demon Lord's bequests!"

His first thoughts were suspicious, but Marchosias was a millennium old, his bequests weren't likely to just be a thing or two. For one of them to turn up in an auction wouldn't be strange.

Barbarus nudged Zagan with his elbow.

"So come on, you come too. You can pick up a woman or two as well. And after that, reckon you could help me with a little support?"

At that, he made the shape of a coin with his fingers. In essence, he wanted to take part in the auction but didn't have enough money. While he let out a sigh, Zagan didn't refuse.

"Then the bequest would be mine, right?"

"Eh, no it wouldn't? I'm the one that told you."

"If you're not happy with it, find someone else."

"There ain't another mage that would lend me money, is there?"

With Barbarus clinging to him on the verge of tears, Zagan resigned himself to going to the auction.

However, his thoughts were.

Women... huh?

Zagan was a man, and it wasn't like he had no interest in the female form. The girl earlier had actually hit right home. However, his thoughts upon imagining a scene with several women waiting upon him went to it being bothersome before they went to alluring.

They could be thought of and treated as tools, but then magic tools that accomplished their given tasks without opening their mouth were far better. It wasn't that he didn't wish to be loved, but the thought of having to treat her in the same way was bothersome too. Rather than the allure of the body, the disadvantages that it would give rise to came to mind. So Zagan had not known a woman until now.

And more importantly, humans that aren't strong die quickly.

No matter what was done to a weak human, they couldn't complain, if they wanted to protect themselves, they should just become stronger.

That was why Zagan had become a strong mage at a mere eighteen years of age.

...Well, him putting on such an aloof mage's act also only lasted up until that moment.



Kianoides was a canal city. Boats floated upon the canals that stretched like branches towards the four corners of the continent, and it was a prosperous town based on distribution. It wasn't just goods, but various races gathered there as well.

Besides humans, there were therianthropes, with beast-like claws and fur, people with wings upon their back, dwarves that specialised in delicate decorations, at odds with their short and boorish appearances.

Boats sailed past, with their various coats of arms hoisted, and even the wind blowing in from the canals couldn't cover the tumult and scent of the earth. It was probably one of the most beautiful cities in the county, and it was said that every day, more than a million people passed through.

There were several within that beautiful city wearing collars with chains attached. Slaves.

There were humans, but also those of other races, and the people they were with weren't limited to humans. There were dwarves striking at huge men with canes, humans accompanying beautiful winged women, and therianthropes lapping up milk from plates on the floor like dogs.

Some of them were no doubt 'goods' to be auctioned off.

The difference between those who were slaves and those who were not was in money, power, and luck. Zagan had desperately sought strength, so he wasn't sympathetic.

However, he murmured.

"It feels oddly charged."

He was talking about the town's atmosphere.

This wasn't the first time he had come to Kianoides, but the Church's knights were patrolling everywhere. The citizens seemed frightened too, and full of rage. It was a presence that wasn't normally tangible.

Barbarus smiled cheerfully.

"It seems like some morons are exclusively collecting young women for a magic experiment."

"Sacrifices, huh? That's a pretty risky bridge to cross."

By using sacrifices, it was possible to control magic that you could not individually. Using reagents was common, so it wasn't that rare in itself. However, using bought slaves or captured vagrants was the minimum required to not get caught. Going out of your way to draw the attention of the Church like this by kidnapping normal girls was incomprehensible. It seemed that someone was picking a fight with the Church.

Barbarus shrugged.

"I wonder? When you start to put on so much restrictions, like their age and such, it's no wonder that it would only end up with such girls getting kidnapped, is it?"

"Maybe they're trying to summon demons?" The name of monsters spoken of in stories, with horns and wings. It wasn't certain that they existed, but there was evidence of 'something' like gods or devils existing in this world. To summon one, a ritual like Barbarus was suggesting would be required, but Zagan thought it was a pipe dream. At his exasperated expression, Barbarus laughed cheerfully. "Speaking of, Zagan, apparently they think you might be one of them, you know?"

"Pathetic, what use is magic that requires sacrifices when the time comes?"

"Heehaha, you're not wrong. That said, you don't even have any allies you're around."

When that was said, his shoulders dropped unintentionally.

Well, I don't need allies.

He was used to being alone. He was used to it.

Even as they spoke, the mages' goal wasn't sightseeing. Barbarus lead them to an underground area within the city.

There were old ruins within the area, probably an arena, and they had been repaired and made into a market, dealing in things that wouldn't sell well above-ground.

The auction hall was in the main area of the arena. There was a circular stage with chairs arrayed around it. It seemed that the auction had already begun, as several voices resounded, calling out numbers.

Only the stage was lit, the seating didn't even have candles. This wasn't a courtesy, it was a measure so the bidders could not see each others' faces.

...Well, it didn't mean much to mages though.

Securing their seats, Barbarus let out a whistle.

"Oi, look, Zagan. There's Black Edge Cimeries, and there's Seductress Gomory, and there's even Apparition Valefar over there."

Even without light, if you were to call yourself a mage, being able to use night vision magic was only natural. Looking in the direction Barbarus indicated, he saw the silhouettes of several clad in an overbearing presence.

Zagan didn't know them, but they were all well-known mages. The majority were human, but other races were visible here and there. Black Edge Cimeries, for example, was a therianthrope with a gallant mane, and Apparition Valefar was covered completely with a hood and robe, so it was impossible to tell their race.

The prefixes such as 'Black Edge' were the mages aliases, and could be thought of as titles, given to those who held a certain amount of power. Amongst the most famous would be Demon Lord Marchosias' 'Grand Elder'. Barbarus was also called Purgatory.

Zagan was also a well-known mage, but he hadn't been given an alias. It was partly because of his youth, but the Demon Lord that controlled this area, Marchosias' death was also a large factor. Giving those aliases was one of the roles of the Demon Lord, but he had died before he could give one to Zagan.

In short, an alias was proof of strength. Though they were unrelated, he had a slight interest in those that held aliases.

"Are they strong?"

"They are, same as you and I, they got nominated to be the next Demon Lord."

With Marchosias' death, one of the seats of the Demon Lords was empty. The remaining Demon Lords were currently discussing how to fill that seat, and strong mages should have been nominated.

"Ha, if those lot are coming out of the woodwork, maybe this is a real bequest."

"Let's pray that that's so."

If it wasn't, then there was no point in sacrificing his sleep to come here. The

auction progressed as they did this.

“Ladies and Gentleman, next is, at last, the final, and greatest, lot for today!”

Barbarus leaned forwards at the auctioneer’s voice.

“Oi, looks like it’ll be soon, Zagan.”

“Yeah.”

They didn’t know if there really was a bequest, but today’s centrepiece would be taking the stage.

Finally, it appeared on stage, a slight person, their head covered by a hood. They were covered by a cloak to their feet, and even their very race was unclear. They weren’t small enough to be a dwarf, but they could be a child of any of the other races.

Was the hooded person carrying the bequest in question?

With the attention of the people in the hall, the auctioneer began an explanation.

“This was originally a product that was to be delivered to our Demon Lord Marchosias. However, he passed away before the delivery, and we retrieved the unfinished order accordingly.”

At those words, Barbarus grimaced.

“So it’s not his bequest?”

“It’s probably one of the Demon Lord’s reagents.”

Magic wasn’t only performed by drawing magic circles and chanting spells, tools were also used. From the ink used to draw circles, talismans the mage wore, to sacrifices to increase the strength of magic. Those tools were called reagents, but the advantages and disadvantages in a reagent would be shown in the difference in their strength.

It was unfortunate that it wasn’t a bequest, but there was a certain interest in a reagent that the Demon Lord themselves would choose.

Then, the auctioneer removed the cloak from the hooded person.

Beneath it was a lovely girl with long, pointed ears.

It was clear at a glance. This was an elf, one of the legendary race which only lived in Norden, where humans could not tread.

She had snow-white hair that covered to her waist, and a deep, red ribbon decorating that hair. On her small face were large eyes that were the deep blue of the summer sky, and her lips were relatively thin and a light peach colour. Her delicate body was enclosed in a pure white dress, and her appearance was such that she could be called a princess and it would be believed.

However, her limbs had shackles on, and there was a magic restraining collar around her neck. Zagan looked into the girl's eyes and felt his heart quiver, and felt something run through his body from the tips of his toes to the crown of his head. Depressed, empty eyes.

Seeing nothing, thinking nothing, they were the eyes of someone that had given up all hope for the future.

Despite this, for some reason, he couldn't tear his eyes from hers.

"This is one of the legendary elves, captured from Norden! And with such white hair as you can see. This isn't dyed, it's a natural, white-haired elf!"

Elves were said to be a race closer to gods and spirits than humans. And regardless of race, individuals with white hair often had large amounts of magic power through something like a mutation.

Sacrificing a white-haired elf, the power of a Demon Lord would be attainable.

The auctioneer circled around behind the elf girl and smoothly pulled out a lock of that hair with a finger.

"Furthermore, as a female, this is a high-class item, it doesn't just have value as a magic sacrifice, it's valuable as a cherished slave. Of course, the customer is free to tease and lick as well!" The auctioneer proclaimed loudly.
"Now then, let us start at ten thou—"

"One million."

As he became aware, Zagan had proclaimed that.

What is this pounding in my chest?

Love, yes, that would describe it.

He wanted to save the elf girl standing there. He wanted to see her smile, he wanted to touch her skin.

Those impulses that he had never before felt drove Zagan.

Suddenly, the auction hall fell silent. Barbarus' face twitched next to Zagan.

"O-oi, Zagan...?"

"One million, in Kuriotes gold."

That was the entirety of the fortune in Zagan's castle.

The bewildered auctioneer dabbed at the sweat on his forehead as he raised his voice.

"Thank you very much! A wonderfully large bid, one million! Are there any other takers? Are there?"

To devote themselves to their research, mages had a tendency to stockpile money. However, though they may amass large sums of money, millions didn't usually appear that often. There were probably several people that had that much, but if they were to use it, it would be for their research. It was that kind of fortune.

"Oi, Zagan, what are you thinking? Even if it's an elf, that much money..."

"There was something I always wanted, but I didn't know what it was. I think I finally found it."

Zagan murmured incoherently, not sure how to explain his feelings. However, seen by outsiders, the bright flame in his eyes was awfully evil. Though that was only natural as he was spurred on by his passion. Barbarus opened his eyes wide in fear.

"What kind of magic are you planning to use...?"

It seemed he'd misunderstood something. Zagan shook his head.

"That's not it. Maybe other magic isn't even necessary. I can't put it well, but it's that kind of thing."

"Getting another level of power, without even magic...?"

It seemed his phrasing had been misunderstood, as Barbarus shuddered.

If he spoke any further, it seemed that it would grow even stranger. Zagan laughed to say Barbarus was wrong, but even he had lost his head, so it sounded like the laugh of a demon.

Barbarus fell back, boneless, into his seat.

Did he misunderstand again?

While his justification to his partner in crime got worse and worse, the gavel announcing a successful bid finally sounded.

“Congratulations! Mage Zagan wins the white-haired elf!”

He didn’t remember naming himself, but the auctioneer guessed right on seeing his face. That alone showed that he was a well-known face in these circles, but that was inconsequential. Zagan stood from his chair and used flight magic, leaving Barbarus slumped where he was. He flew over the seating and landed softly on the stage.

He stood in front of the girl, but she still didn’t lift her downcast eyes.

What should I do, should I say something?

Leaping down was all well and good, but he hadn’t thought in the slightest of what came next. At his sudden hesitation, the auctioneer wheedled.

“Please, go ahead and take her. What a lucky elf to be won by the famed mage Zagan. Incidentally, the dress and magic restraining collar are a gift from us. Please be aware that there is the risk it will escape should the collar be removed.”

“Sure.”

He didn’t listen to what the auctioneer was saying, but Zagan answered appropriately.

Won’t she at least look this way? But I suppose it is scary. That said, I’m not going to consign you to a terrible fate, you know?

Precisely because she was so beautiful, saying that would only earn a disgusted glare. The girl this morning was the same.

Uneasily, he gently reached out a hand to her chin. She had silky smooth skin, so much so that Zagan felt he'd injure her with his mere touch.

Even so, he touched her as gently as he could, and the girl's face raised a little, her vacant eyes gazed at him.

A gasp escaped him unintentionally, she really was a lovely girl.

However, they didn't seem to focus on him, it was doubtful she was even looking at him. No, more than that, he couldn't sense any volition in her.

I-is she okay? Is she being controlled or something?

Magic that deprived one of their will wasn't rare. The auctioneer nervously spoke to Zagan as he paled.

"Zagan-sama? Is there a problem?"

"...No, is she conscious?"

Coming from his dry throat, his voice sounded more ill-tempered than uneasy, so much so that he wanted to ask himself what he was angry about.

However, the auctioneer nodded as if in understanding.

"Please rest assured. The elf has been docile since its capture, It has been kept in its natural state. Besides, it posses a vast amount of magic for an individual, average magic would have no effect. Therefore, we guarantee its freshness."

When used as a sacrifice, restraining something with magic and brainwashing would become impurities in the ritual, and lower its precision. It seemed that the auctioneer believed that Zagan was concerned about this.

However, the elf that was dressed up as a lady didn't seem to have any wounds. She may have been treated as a slave, but the management weren't foolish enough to wound a 'product' of this value. He could probably trust that.

Zagan finally sighed in relief.

"Believe me, if she can't at least sing well, there will be a problem."

He most of all wanted her to be able to speak properly... was what he wanted to say, but he got his phrasing wrong on a large scale.

The auctioneer retreated with a pale face.

The elf girl seemed to shake in fear too.

Ah, thank goodness. I was understood.

Zagan was relieved at that, but didn't realise just how badly he had misled them.

This was the first love at first sight for this man who had thought 'women are just a bother' mere hours earlier.

Chapter 2 — First Love with a Communication Disorder is like Mouldy Bread

And thus, it came to this. After promptly completing the payment, he was glad until they returned to the castle. However, he spent an hour from then agonising over how to speak to her, when the girl had spoken.

“How... will you be killing me?”

There was no time to linger on her voice being what they called as clear as a bell.

Whilst he had removed the shackles on her limbs, the magic restraining collar was still around her neck. Zagan had wanted to remove it, but even he wasn't able to easily do so. The auctioneer didn't know how to remove it either, and there wasn't a key or anything. It was most likely amongst the remnants from the Demon Lord, her original purchaser, so there was nothing to do but spend time investigating it.

She didn't have any expression whatsoever, but the girl appealed in a tragic voice.

“If I knew how I was to die... I think I might be able to resolve myself a little to it.”

The girl's face wasn't anxious at all, but resigned. Zagan yelled, flusteredly.

“Wait, wait, wait! I don't intend to kill you. Rather, it would be a problem if you were to die.”

He'd intended to reassure her, but for some reason, the girl's expression clouded even further.

“In other words, there will be no end, such that death is a joy... correct?”

The girl was pale and looking up at the chains hanging from the ceiling, and the bones wrapped in them.

A cold sweat ran down his cheeks.

No, it was just too much trouble to bother to use magic to clean up there, so I

left it!

This castle was once another mage's residence. The funds he had used to buy the girl were remainders from them too, Zagan hadn't strictly speaking amassed it himself.

However, the previous owner was, for better or worse, a quintessential mage, and within the castle were tools of torture and magic, with corpses and bones lying around. Having bones hanging from the ceiling wasn't to Zagan's tastes, but saying otherwise in this situation wouldn't be particularly persuasive.

Even though he was panicking, Zagan pretended to be calm and spoke.

"Rest assured. I don't intend to use those kinds of unsettling things on you, I don't intend to harm you. There is nothing for you to fear."

He wasn't able to say it particularly kindly, but he thought he had been able to convey what he wanted to... Whether it was persuasive was another matter though.

Perhaps expectedly, the girl tilted her head in question.

"Then... why did you buy me?"

"Ugh, that's..."

It was an obvious question. However, because of his personality, he couldn't say that he had fallen for her at first sight.

What should I do in this kind of situation, I wish I had asked Barbarus...

Zagan had left him behind after the auction, but why hadn't he followed along? He didn't seem to be overflowing with sexual experience either, but even so, he

did

naturally use phrases like 'pick the right woman'. At the very least, he probably knew better than Zagan how to deal with women.

The answer that rushed out of Zagan's mouth as he groaned as if he had been cornered was this.

"There is no need for you to know."

What am I saying!? He cried out mentally.

However, the girl's expression oddly didn't change. It was such that only a faint despondency was visible.

Isn't her calm a little odd?

She might not be good at expressing herself, but rather than that, she seemed like she had given up on everything. They had said that nothing had been done to her body since her capture, but something had probably happened...

"Are you..." Zagan began to speak, but then realised he didn't even know her name.

And she shouldn't know anything about me either.

Finally, he felt he'd seized upon the beginning of a conversation.

"My name is Zagan. I'm a mage as you can see, but torture isn't exactly my thing."

"Right."

"So, what's your..."

He was just trying to ask her name, but Zagan couldn't speak.

No! ...I was just going to ask her name, why does her being a girl make me this nervous!

Zagan was already fairly powerful as a mage. However, he lacked the courage to stand in the face of certain death in a hopeless situation.

'Courage', it was a word that he had thought was unrelated to him. However, if he couldn't muster any now, there wouldn't be any progress.

"What's you—"

As he opened his mouth again, the girl let out an 'ah' and spoke.

"My apologies for the delay. I am called Nephilia."

It felt like a cool breeze blew within his chest. It seemed like she'd presumed what Zagan wanted to say, and he thought.

What an attentive, wonderful girl.

“Nephilia... huh.”

It was a sound he wanted to repeat over and over. There was the word ‘Nephilim’ in legends which meant ‘one that fell from the heavens’, it was probably the feminine form of that. He thought it was a mystical, wonderful name.

It's a beautiful name, the same as her looks.

His spirits soared from simply knowing her name, and he understood the phrase ‘love destroys people’ all too well.

You could call it a constant high. If a person was constantly in this mental state, he could see how even the best of people would fall to ruin.

But is Nephilia her first name or family name?

Schooling his slackened expression, Zagan questioned her.

“Nephilia... what?”

“It is just Nephilia. I do not have a surname. If it's hard to say, you may call me Nepbie.”

“I can!?”

“Yes?”

The name Nephilia was a beautiful sound, but the nickname Nepbie was adorable too. The girl — Nepbie tilted her head at his sudden outburst.

Actually, not having a surname is the same as me...

From when he was old enough to remember, he had been stealing from rubbish heaps. Let alone his surname, he didn't even know what his parents looked like. ‘Zagan’ was a nickname he was given, slang in the slums for a wicked person that was demonic or something.

Now that I think about it, those days were the best. My thief comrades and the townspeople would talk properly with me. I might have gotten beat up a lot, but it was sort of fulfilling.

What he'd done were certainly crimes, but he was in a bright place, and could even talk naturally with girls. If Zagan was to think of the bright days of his past,

it would be those times.

Then, he noticed Nephe staring at him blankly and shook his head.

“Is that, um, normal for elves? Not having a surname?”

“No, it is because I was a cursed child.”

“A cursed child...?”

Zagan scowled, hearing an inexcusable phrase. She put a hand before her lips, as if she had let herself slip.

“Um... why would you ask something like that?”

“Ah, I was just kinda curious, and...”

He hesitated to say that it wasn’t just her name or the meaning of ‘cursed child’, that he simply wanted to know more about her.

Nephe once more nodded as if presuming, and for some reason, lifted the front of her skirt.

Her snow-white thighs were laid bare, and even her underwear, woven of delicate lace were barely visible.

“Please rest assured, I am a virgin.”

He knew his face had gone red.

“D-do you know what you’re blurting out!?:

“Hmm? It’s said that virgins have more magic. Weren’t you making sure your experiment materials weren’t spoilt?”

“Don’t misunderstand me, I don’t intend to use you in an experiment, or to torture you.”

Nephe made a face as if she didn’t understand all the more.

“Then, why was I bought?”

“...” Zagan held his forehead and fell silent. “There’s no need for you to know that.”

And then, once more, answered with the same words. Or rather, he couldn’t answer.

If someone heard that it was love at first sight, and he bought her in cash, they would certainly brand him as a mere pervert. Zagan wouldn't be able to stand Nephie looking at him like that. No matter how perpetually young they were, a mage could still die of shock.

That aside, not giving her an answer at all is probably making her nervous.

What should he do? Maybe he should let her go home for the day...

Wait, does she even have anywhere to go?

She'd called herself by the ominous phrase 'cursed child' earlier, and didn't seem to want to be asked about it. Zagan himself was someone with nowhere to return to, and he had the same sign of a lack of a surname. Of course, if she wanted to return home, he'd like to help her, but it didn't seem like the kind of mood that he could nonchalantly ask that.

If it came to it, Zagan had bought her body, so for the meantime, they'd live here together but...

Huh, live together?

He, who had yet to speak to her properly, would be living alone under the same roof with a lovely girl like this? He felt a little dizzy.

What an outrageous thing he had done. Ah, he was, of course, happy, but he felt as if he had done something he shouldn't have.

Calm down. You're a mage, a powerful mage doesn't lose their head.

They wouldn't be sharing a bed after all. First would be living... he should probably start with what she needed to live.

Zagan stood from his throne and stood before Nephie.

"Nephie."

"Yes."

Standing directly in front of her and calling her name was strangely embarrassing. Even so, he addressed her without faltering.

"Nephie, I bought you, and you are mine."

"I am."

"So first, let's give you a room. You can pick one you like."

"In other words, you are having me choose a place to die?"

"I already said I wasn't going to kill you, didn't I?"

"I don't understand... why you would do that... for me. No matter how you use me... Won't I still die in the end?"

It was probably a question she had been asking since her capture by humans, so much so that she didn't want to hope anymore.

Zagan actually had similar memories.

Back when he was scavenging for food from the trash-filled slums, and stealing.

Back then... what did I want to be told...?

Even at the time, he probably wouldn't have known the answer. But even so, Zagan gently reached out a hand into Nephie's hair. As he touched her hair with his hand, he understood what was making her shudder. Staying like that, without putting any force behind his hand, he said this.

"I bought you because I need you. So don't go on about dying."

Nephie looked up at him with wide eyes in surprise. It was the first time he had seen her with such an expressive expression since he had met her.

"I'm... nece...ssary?"

It had gotten a little embarrassing, but he felt he had to get this across clearly.

"Yes, I need you. So start living for me."

"...I will."

Nephie's expression remained the same as always, but she didn't look like she doubted his words either.

This didn't mean that she believed in him totally, but even so, she didn't seem to be grieving at her oncoming death.

This was the start of their long cohabitation.



"Now then, the room for you..."

Where would be good? Nephie had been captured as a slave, so she was sure to have gone through hardships. A room where there was some nice scenery would be better than some dark cellar.

In which case, the spire at the top of the castle would be the best place for a view. Just as he went to guide her there, he suddenly noticed.

"Nephie, are you okay with high places?"

Even he thought this was a fairly reasonable question. Still expressionless, she nodded.

"Yes, being strung up by my hands, or my neck is fine."

"Who said anything about torture?"

"I... apologise. When I heard high places, I couldn't think of anything else."

Zagan held his head in his hands at her blank-faced response.

Have more of a will to live, will you...

Given the situation, a high room would probably be a problem. He didn't think it likely, but the risk of Nephie throwing herself from it crossed his mind.

But still, they ascended the spiral stairs and headed to the highest floor. It seemed that the sun had set. With a snap of his fingers, the candles lining the walls were lit at once.

"This way."

"Right — ah—"

As Zagan went to climb the stairs once more, Nephie let out a small cry and staggered. The flickering flames of the candles were somewhat unreliable as lights, it was dark by their feet, and the pointed heels of Nephie's shoes made it hard to walk.

Zagan immediately caught her hand and supported her.

"I... apologise..."

The girl's face was so close that their noses nearly touched, and a faint, sweet

scent tickled his nose. Bordered by white eyelashes, her deep blue eyes were staring right into his. He couldn't help but be fascinated, and at the same time, a deep sense of shame filled him.

To misdirect her from this, he cleared his throat.

"B-be careful. Look where you're putting your feet."

"I... will..."

He probably said it somewhat roughly as Nephe seemed to wince. As they climbed the stairs, Zagan became aware of a soft feeling within his hand.

Huh? Am I... holding Nephe's hand maybe?

He'd held her to support her. And then inadvertently lead her along by her hand. He thought it probably wasn't the first time, but it was hard to remember holding a girl's hand before... Maybe it really was the first time.

Her pale white hand was slender, soft, and warm. He could feel her heartbeat through her palm, or maybe it was his own?

Whilst Nephe was looking at his hand in surprise, she followed without a word.

While he was filled with an indescribable shyness, he also didn't want to let go of her hand. In fits and starts, Zagan climbed to the top floor. It was after climbing about three floors, that the entrance to the top floor was visible.

He was a little worried that the climb to and from it would make having this room tough on her, but he put his hand on the door for now.

"I don't normally use this room, so it might be a touch dirty."

As he said that, the fundamental question 'have I even entered this room?' passed through his mind. He had lived here for about a decade, but he normally secluded himself in the archives, and couldn't say he'd figured the entire place out.

And thus, he regretted not confirming those doubts.

A cool wind blew into the room, and a guillotine's blade swayed and rang.



Moreover, it seemed that there were skeletal corpses and bottles with mysterious substances inside them scattered throughout the room. With the

help of the dim candlelight, it was the height of unsettling.

"Let's not go with this."

He hurriedly closed the door, but was a little too slow.

People despaired the most when they were given hope. The light in Nephe's eyes vanished at being thrust before implements of torture just as she was told she was necessary. The girl spread her arms as if she was throwing everything away.

"Please, do as you will, master."

"That's not it, you know? It's, you know... That's right! It's a trap for invaders from above." Even as he said it, he thought it was a pathetic excuse. "But, well, you know. It's kind of pointless, and gets in the way. I'll get rid of it."

So saying, he threw lightning magic into the room with the swaying guillotine and shut the door once more.

Immediately, an explosion followed.

The shock of the blast spilt from the cracks around the door, and Nephe's snow-white hair swayed gently in it. As he was taken in by the sight, the door fell into the room with a crash. Apparently, even the hinges had broken.

Sure enough, there were no traces of any of the terrifying things from before within the room... Well, it was scorched right to the ceiling, so it might not be usable as a room anymore, and even the candles had been blown out. Suddenly, a chill ran down his cheeks.

B-but the source of her fear should be gone.

He looked back at Nephe, who was petrified in fear, and she was somewhat pale.

She parted quivering lips.

"It's the first time... I've seen such destructive magic."

Well of course she'd be scared if you just start throwing attack magic around!

And even if it had seemed reserved, it had enough force behind it to turn an average mage to ashes three times over. There wasn't a single normal person

that wouldn't be perturbed by that.

No, just the only one I've spoken to face to face is probably Barbarus, so I just...

Went along as if he were with another mage.

With nothing else to be done, he turned his back on the room.

"...Yeah, this is no good, it's too dreary."

"This... is called dreary?"

Zagan couldn't answer the girl that was tilting her head like a small bird.

Nephie stepped into the room.

Each step sent plumes of ash dancing into the air. There wasn't even glass in the window, it was more like a birdcage than a room. It was not at all a place girls should tread.

Even so, Nephie continued through onto the balcony.

I should probably put a bounded field against falling or something here.

Of course, he wanted to believe that Nephie wouldn't throw herself off, but he'd blasted it with magic. At the worst, the thing could be destroyed.

As he was guarding against the worst case scenario, they stood next to each other.

While the balcony had a stone hand railing, that had cracks through it too, and it wouldn't be strange if it collapsed.

Placing her hands on that railing, she looked up at the sky. As it had turned to night, it seemed that the clouds had cleared up some, and a thin sliver of moon hung alone in the sky like a thread.

Facing the sky, Nephie raised both hands. Despite seeming to be a casual act, it felt like he was watching some kind of sacred ritual.

"Do you... like the moon?"

"...I don't know."

Nephie shook her head with a troubled look at his questioning.

"Then, what's that act mean?"

"...I don't know."

It seemed like she was only answering questions with 'I don't know' now.

However, Nephie's eyes seemed to swim with a heartrending homesickness. Somehow, Zagan ended up imitating her too, reaching his hands out.

"I didn't catch anything."

"...I would think so."

With her answering so seriously, he wanted to die of shame. Why could he never think of a good line at these kind of times?

Then, Nephie murmured.

"May I... have this room?"

This was the first time Nephie had said something like that. However, Zagan looked back over the room hesitantly. There were certainly none of the ominous things from before, but in exchange, there wasn't even glass in the windows. It didn't look like a room a person could live in.

And if I fixed it with magic, that'd even bring the guillotine back.

The cleaning and repairs would have to be done by hand.

"A more suitable room would be..."

As he spoke, he remembered that the other rooms were all in similar states. Even if there were no torture implements, there were unpleasant magic tools scattered around. In the end, there wasn't a room suitable for a girl to use.

Zagan spoke from his worries.

"Are you sure this place is alright?"

"Yes, because it's the room you prepared for me, master."

He'd just obliterated everything inside with attack magic. He didn't think he could really call that 'preparing', but...

Even if he said another room would be better, he couldn't help but doubt that, so in the end, Zagan nodded.

"Very well. Then you may use it as you wish."

He happened to put it rather exaggeratedly, but Nephe bobbed her head in acknowledgement and spoke.

"Thank you very much, master."

Those words, for some reason, pierced his chest.

Nephe tilted her head in question.

"What is it?"

"...Nothing, I just thought it'd been a fair while since that was said to me."

He had sometimes let humans that had gotten lost in the castle escape without killing them, but he didn't look like a good person. Ordinarily, they'd just race away, not thank him.

However, Nephe didn't seem to find that strange, and nodded in understanding.

"It feels like it's been a long time since I said it... too"

"I see..."

Someday, the day would probably come where he would say 'thank you' as well.

They were far from opening their hearts to each other, but he was honestly happy that they had been able to hold a proper conversation.

And thus, their first day drew to a close.



The next morning. Though she had been given the room, Nephe couldn't possibly sleep on that top floor, so they both slept in the throne room that night.

Well, I couldn't sleep a wink.

He hadn't slept the night before either, so he'd thought he would be able to quickly fall asleep, but when he thought of Nephe next to him, he ended up wide awake. Yet despite that, he didn't have the courage to actually do

something, and when he thought of how she would hate him, he couldn't do anything.

Nephie herself really was tired, she had curled up on the carpet and slept.

However, this too was one of the reasons Zagan couldn't sleep. With her looking that defenceless, telling himself to not think anything was unreasonable. She had seemed cold during the night, so he had put his own cloak over her in place of bedding, but that might not have been good, for some reason, thinking of the lovely girl wearing his cloak, his heart pounded. And as he worried endlessly about that kind of thing, the sun had risen before he noticed.

His stomach growled pathetically.

"...I guess I should eat."

Zagan went down to the basement storeroom and brought out two portions of preserved meat and milk. He didn't know when Nephie would be waking up, but he decided to make it so she could eat right away at least.

When he returned to the throne room, Nephie was kneeling, waiting for him. His cloak she had slept in was neatly folded and it seemed like it would be a waste to wear it again.

"You're up then?"

"Yes, good morning, master."

Zagan couldn't help but break into a smile.

So she'll give a proper greeting.

He himself was puzzled at how to return the greeting and held his head with 'Huh, what kind of response are you supposed to give to good morning?' going through it.

Should he say 'morning' back? Or reply with 'hello'? He did think 'good day' was wrong though. Now that he thought of it, how many years had it been since he'd had a proper greeting?

Nephie watched his agonising in blank amazement, and cleared her throat with a cough.

"I brought some food, go ahead and eat."

As he spoke, he couldn't help but hate himself a little.

Can't I even give a greeting properly...?

When had he become such a worthless person?

Now that he thought about it, he had the feeling he might have been worthless from the start.

Even as she looked at Zagan worry to himself, Nephe obediently took the dried meat and cup of milk.

"Thank you, master."

"...Sure."

As he was depressed at his own worthlessness, Nephe timidly looked up at him.

"Master?"

"What is it?"

"What... should I do?"

"Hmm, let's see..."

Even after a night, he couldn't think of what he should have her do.

Should I have her clean?

However, just looking into a room yesterday was a disaster.

There were close to fifty such rooms in the castle, and they hadn't even been cleaned once. It was far too much for a single person, and he somehow had the feeling that if he were to order her, she'd work at it until it was done.

In the first place, Zagan wasn't fussy about his surroundings, nor did he have any interest in their cleanliness, so having her go through such a mind-numbing experience wouldn't sit right with him.

What then should he have her do?

Not having her do anything would probably unsettle her too...

The girl had been trained to think of herself as a sacrifice or a lab rat. Yet he didn't think that being told to just stand around by the man who bought her would make her rejoice with 'Ah, I don't have to do anything.'

Nephie made a surprised face.

"Master, you are eating the same thing?"

"Hm? Is there something strange about that?"

"No, umm..."

She seemed to want to say something, but instead, let her gaze wander around the room as if she couldn't put it into words.

"Just say it, it's not like I'll get angry."

Managed Zagan, even as he cursed himself for not being able to put it more gently.

Her expression didn't change, but she opened her mouth as if it was awfully hard to say.

"I am honoured to simply receive food. However, for you to eat the same food as well, master... it's strange..."

In her own way, she was questioning him the best she could.

Zagan folded his arms and thought. What on earth was it that she found strange? The things in front of him were simply milk poured into a dirty cup, and dried meat from some time or another.

Hmm? There were folks eating this kind of thing in the town yesterday, weren't there?

That was right, the slaves he saw in Kianoides. Seeing them in the streets was fairly pitiful, but when he thought about it properly, he ate the same kind of things.

With a thoughtful noise and nod, Zagan opened his mouth.

"Is it that this is a plain meal, perhaps?"

"Ah, yes... I think it's the kind of food slaves like me are given."

In other words, rather than a meal, it was ‘feed’.

However, rather than take offence, she was simply lamenting. No, it was more like—

Is she... worried?

No, that was probably slightly wrong. She most likely wouldn’t open her heart in a single day.

Rather than that, it seemed like the kind of sympathetic response you would give when, for example, you can’t endure looking at the person, no matter who they may be, and thought, ‘If I don’t do anything for them, won’t they just die?’.

As he chewed roughly at his own food, he gazed at the wrinkled dry meat.

Yes, that’s right. You can’t even call this food a meal.

He’d eaten nothing but this kind of food since his thieving days, so hadn’t thought to question it. Other than dry meat, he’d eaten hard bread, but that would soon go mouldy and be inedible. Even so, he’d forced himself to eat it a few times, and then felt woeful with the stomach ache afterwards.

Looking back on me going nowhere since yesterday, really reminds me of that bread.

He’d heard it said that your first love tasted of lemon, but it seemed it was really sour enough to turn the stomach.

If he was to talk about what he really thought was tasty, it would be alcohol. The alcohol that Barbarus had brought when he was messing around was delicious, but even then, the accompaniment was dried meat.

Not knowing how to buy alcohol himself, his life ended up continuing on dried meat.

“I wonder what normal people eat...”

At his involuntary murmur, Nephie seemed to resolve herself and opened her mouth.

“Um, master.”

“What?”

She took a short, deep breath and spoke.

“This may be impertinent, but, shall I make something?”

Zagan stood with a clatter and grabbed Nephie’s hand tightly as she recoiled in surprise.

“You can cook?”

“I learnt by watching, so I can’t guarantee the taste, but...”

Oh, what a talent.

Home cooking.

And made by the girl he loved, at that. That choice hadn’t even occurred to Zagan.

A desire for food is supposed to be one of humanity’s three great needs, isn’t it...

He hadn’t thought to fulfil those desires, only to research magic.

His eyes burned.

Were these tears welling up within him? He was honestly surprised he still had something like tears in him.

Zagan drained his milk in a single gulp.

“Phew, Nephie, I’ve decided what we should do.”

“Yes, what might that be?”

“Shopping in town!”

There were no ingredients other than dried meat and milk in the castle, and even Zagan knew you couldn’t make a meal with those alone.

“.....Ah, right.”

Looking up at him blankly, Nephie too then clapped her hands in agreement.

She might have thought she needed to give some kind of reaction, but Zagan was somewhat embarrassed.



The biggest town around was Kianoides, but there were also several smaller towns and villages around the abandoned castle. Zagan was heading towards one of these, but as he left the castle, he noticed a problem.

Now that I think about it, I used everything I owned to buy Nephie...

He was undoubtedly penniless.

He had been spurred on by the voice in his heart but hadn't given a thought to the consequences. Because Kianoides was a trade town, it had roads stretching from it to all the areas around it, these were dotted with towns and you would normally use a carriage to move between them. If you walked along the road, you'd soon find a shared carriage or something.

It was just as he was about to enter one of these carriages that he finally noticed he had no money.

"Not getting one?"

Zagan shook his head at the inquisitive driver — a cat-faced therianthrope.

"Ahh, it looks like I forgot something, go on ahead?"

"That so?"

The carriage left with its wheels clattering.

Behind Zagan, who was fruitlessly watching the carriage leave, Nephie tilted her head.

"Shall we return to the castle?"

"Nah, there's no need."

"Is that so...?"

If they went back to the castle, there still wouldn't be even a single copper coin there. He might be able to sell some of the torture implements, but calling in an assessor would cost a fair amount of money.

Actually, we need something for Nephie to wear too.

Since yesterday, the girl had been wearing that pure white dress, and it was now dirty because the castle itself was dirty.

Somehow, he'd have to get some money.

To distract from that, Zagan murmured with a dignified expression.

"It's been a while since I've been out at this hour, walking every once in a while is nice too."

"It is."

He set off after the cart as he gave his painful excuse, and Nephe followed along.

When he glanced back, Nephe had taken the hem of her skirt in her hands and was trotting along to keep up. There was a difference in their strides, but the dress and those shoes might be hard to walk in. With a little awareness, he walked slower.

As they walked, Zagan worried.

Should I have attacked the carriage and taken their money and goods?

He hadn't done so recently, but he'd eaten like that in the past.

But he'd scared Nephe last night when he used attack magic. And what would she think of a man committing highway robbery right in front of her?

I guess highway robbery really is no good.

How then, would he get some money?

Nephe had said she could cook, so he'd even started to think of disposing of the castle and opening a cafe for light meals when a scream came down from the road.

Nephe gasped.

"Master."

"Mm? Ah, it's probably some highway robbery or something, there are bandits around here sometimes."

In the distance, they could see a group of men attacking the carriage with long-bladed hatchets. There were about a dozen armed men, a harmless group of bandits.

They were just normal humans, not mages. They'd not necessarily been trained like knights, and didn't have any troublesome tools like holy knights. They were just normal people being violent with edged weapons.

That was Zagan's recognition of them.

They had dragged along the passengers and dropped them, and were taking the money. They might intend to take the young women along, as they moved them to somewhere else. Maybe they'd sell them to slavers, or use them as playthings, at any rate, there wasn't a pleasant end awaiting them. Zagan felt sorry for the abducted children, but he'd done similar things himself, and didn't think it was a particularly tragic scene.

As he watched it happen unconcernedly, he noticed Nephie had begun to tremble.

"What's wrong?"

"No...thing..."

She was feigning calm, but her complexion had completely paled and her lips were quivering. Her dark eyes were focused on the people being robbed.

Zagan's breath caught.

Was Nephie captured like this too perhaps?

Nephie wasn't initially held by slave dealers, she should have been living peacefully somewhere. She might have remembered those painful memories.

Zagan pointed at the bandits.

"Nephie, look closely. Those kind of people are trash."

"...Right."

Her voice held a touch of dejection. He didn't know what she was dejected about, but Zagan gathered magic in his pointing finger.

Immediately after, a streak of lightning shot off like an arrow.

"Kyaaa!"

Nephiie let out an adorable scream as she covered her face.

A number of the bandits were touched by the tendrils of lightning and were scattered.

Nephie opened and closed her mouth as if she couldn't speak. The bandits stiffened at the sudden attack magic too, as if they couldn't understand what had happened.

I'm not going to say anything pushy like 'I'll protect you'.

Nephie might be scared seeing the attack magic, but under no circumstances would the bandits be able to keep their cool when scared. They were like weeds or pebbles, nothing to be afraid of.

That's why he wanted to show her that even bandits were like harmless little animals.

Even so, it seemed they understood an enemy had appeared.

"D-don't panic! Even if he's a mage, they can't use magic over and over. Get him before he can use it again!"

At the voice of what seemed to be the leader, the bandits rushed at him with weapons in hand.

"Master."

"Get behind me."

So saying to Nephie, whose voice was trembling, Zagan moved forward.

The closest bandit was about two heads taller than Zagan. His bulging arm muscles might have been wider than Nephie's waist.

That huge man attacked with his axe. It was a brutal attack that would probably bisect a huge tree. Zagan's head would be crushed like an egg.

The axe swung downward, right at Zagan's head.

"I-impossible...!"

However, the one to let out a call of surprise was the huge man. Zagan had blocked the axe bare-handed. Not only that, but even when the giant pulled and strained, he couldn't budge the axe in the slightest.

"Challenging a mage in physical strength certainly is a foolish idea."

When speaking of mages, most people would imagine someone shut away in the dark, researching, surrounded by books, with dull movements. However, they could use magic to call down lightning, control fire, and even create invisible shields. They were beyond humans, and first devoted that almighty power to protect themselves.

Their skin was tough enough that an average blade wouldn't even harm it, their legs were fast enough to overtake a swift horse, their arms could tear even iron, and their heart was strong enough that they could fight for an entire day and night without becoming short of breath.

As they aged, mages wielded even more fantastical powers. No matter how much a knight trained, they were monsters that a human body could not stand against.

That was the existence known as a mage.

Zagan strengthened his grip. The axe began to crack and groan, and the giant's eyes widened.

"I-it can't be..."

The axe shattered like glass with a crash, and the man let out a dumbfounded exclamation.

The man had fallen to his knees, crestfallen, and Zagan slapped his forehead lightly, as one might squash a bug.

"Purgh?"

With a pig-like cry, the giant was blown back to the carriage. Landing on top of a bandit that was unlucky enough to be there.

"Hee, Chief!"

...It seemed that it was their leader. With their commander crushed, the other bandits hid away in the shade of the carriage and bushes.

"Geh, h-help... Sir! Help us!"

They were begging for their lives, but their words weren't directed to Zagan. A robed man relaxedly appeared in front of Zagan after lurking somewhere.

He was a mage.

Apparently, the bandits had hired a mage.

"Hmmm... A mage saving people? How strange." The mage rubbed his chin dubiously, and held his other hand aloft. "However, this is part of the contract as well. I don't know who you are, but you should regret showing yourself before me."

Flames burst forth the moment Zagan noticed a small magic circle on the palm of his hand. The heat was enough to take your breath away, and the surrounding bushes caught alight, as the bandits hiding within shrieked in agony.

Carefully observing both the mage's and fire's movements, Zagan murmured.

"I see, drawing another circle using the flames as a medium, huh."

The fire wasn't spreading uncontrollably. It was rushing forth, drawing a circle with the mage at its centre. It wasn't attack magic, it was constructing a magic circle of restraint. A huge circle spread out, engulfing Zagan and the carriage. It seemed like the mage saw Zagan as a formidable enemy, and was using large-scale magic.

Well, there's no reason to deliberately wait for that.

The tongues of flame approached him. Nephie gasped behind him, but Zagan was standing before her.

He irritatedly waved his arm.

The fire seemed to melt away, and even the burning bushes and carriage were extinguished. All that was left was the light of the magic circle at his feet.

Even so, the mage raised his arms and cried loudly.

"Not bad. But you were too slow, become ash!"

The magic circle shone—

And, nothing happened.

"W-what...?"

Even now, the magic circle was shining.

However, it wasn't the mage's circle anymore.

Zagan let out an ostentatious sigh.

"Can't you use a single spell without drawing a huge circle like this?"

When he shook off the fire, Zagan had taken ownership of the circle from the mage. The same way Barbarus had moved into Zagan's bounded field yesterday.

"This is what happens to trash."

Zagan raised his index finger to the sky, then swung it down, drawing a line.

The magic circle shone brighter and burst.

"Gah?"

A lance of light rained straight down from the sky.

It was a focused lightning strike. And though it wasn't too strong, it was strong enough to shatter castle walls if Zagan fired it at them.

The mage took the attack straight on, and disappeared without a trace.

The terrifying thing was that even with that attack, the carriage and the passengers weren't even scratched.

The mage had caused a single flame and even swallowed up his allies, and Zagan had just erased his target. This showed the difference in their abilities. Zagan slowly approached the carriage. There were still bandits there.

"What is it? Come on. Surely after stealing, you're resolved to be stolen from?"

"H-hee, what'd we even do!?"

Were they really in the position to ask that?

The leader, who had finally extricated himself from the giant, fell onto his backside and scooted backwards.

"Who knows. There was just an eyesore over there, right? Are you lot the same kind of thing?"

"Higyaah!"

With a scream, the bandit's eyes rolled up into his head and he fainted...
Judging from the unpleasant smell, he'd pitifully wet himself too.

Seeing the state of their leader, the other bandits threw down their weapons and surrendered. After making sure none would stand against him, Zagan turned back to Nephie. He'd meant to open a safe path for her, but she was still petrified with eyes wide open.

Huh? Did I make another mistake?

A cold sweat overcame him, but Zagan cleared his throat and feigned calm.

"You see, Nephie. Bandits are completely harmless trash. They can't hurt you, they might be an eyesore, but they behave if you just stroke them a little."

"They attacked a carriage, are they really harmless...?"

"Ugh..."

Despite her lack of expression, Nephie's question was unrelenting.

When she's surprised, she replies pretty sharply, huh...

She'd been shocked, but he was happy to be able to see this side of her.

However, looking at the two of them, it seemed someone couldn't stand it and started gushing. And as if the dam had broken, laughter poured forth.

"You're amazing, mage-san!"

Together with the voice, the passengers gathered around Zagan.

"You're the one that didn't get on earlier, right?"

"Thanks, you saved us."

"I guess there are good mages too."

Zagan's eyes swirled at being spoken to like that. It wasn't the first time he'd kicked bandits around, and sometimes he'd even saved people passing by, but it was the first time he'd been thanked like this.

Zagan wasn't the only one surrounded.

"Are you the mage's attendant?"

"Such a beautiful girl."

"You've got a good master."

"Um..."

Nephie was being jostled too. Zagan understood.

Maybe it's because Nephie is with me?

He was sure that if he were alone, they'd run off like normal. He didn't know what they thought because of her presence, but it seemed to make them feel something other than fear.

Zagan felt slightly uncomfortable at having been seriously considering robbing them earlier.

Then, the driver took out a small bag.

"Hey, would you like to ride with us in exchange for your protection? We'll pay you of course... though it's not much."

"S-sure."

With the small bag being pushed into his hands, he couldn't do anything other than accept. From the weight and feel of it, he could tell there were about ten gold coins inside.

It would have been a paltry sum before, but now, he was extremely grateful for it. It was plenty of money to buy the ingredients and Nephie's clothes.

What is this? Is money really that moving?

So it seemed that if he just destroyed some villains, money would come floating down for him.

After he held a slight hope — he thought properly about it, and realised he was one of those villains that should be instantly destroyed and felt weak in the knees.

Before he could fall, he and Nephie were herded into the carriage. As they sat next to each other, their eyes met.

"Master."

"...What?"

“Why... did you save these people?”

“Eh? Ahh... that’s right, I ended up saving them.”

He had only wanted to show Nephie that bandits were nothing to be scared of, and hadn’t realised he was saving the passengers.

But, isn’t this a chance to win some affection?

An ulterior motive grew. He needed a clever phrase to open Nephie’s heart. While praying to Barbarus, who had given him good advice up until now, Zagan answered as if to say it was only natural.

“I was just showing some stuck-up trash its place.”

Why can I never say anything but that kind of thinng!?

Was his pride getting in the way?

He’d thought of honeyed words like that it was to protect Nephie, or that he wouldn’t abandon the weak, yet what flowed from his mouth was a bluff as useless as dog crap.

Zagan despaired as he threw the chance right into the trash himself. So he didn’t notice. That Nephie actually seemed to look up at him in deeper interest.



“See you, mate. You can ride when you like, it’s free for you.”

Zagan had gotten into the carriage and ended up coming to Kianoides, they stopped, and the cat-faced driver left him behind with those words.

The town was as noisy as always. Looking in one direction, you would see a noblewoman enjoying her shopping, looking in another you would see a filthy punk selling drugs. It was a chaotic city, but by the same token, had anything and everything.

Now then, where to go?

Gathering ingredients was their goal for the time being, but there currently wasn’t anything in the castle that Nephie would need for her life there.

In the first place, what does a girl need for her life?

Zagan was ignorant there. After clearing his throat with a cough, he looked at Nephie.

"Nephie, most things are available in this town. You can choose what you need."

"Even being given rags would satisfy me."

Zagan wanted to cry at her answer, bereft of hopes and dreams.

Of course. A girl that doesn't know what will become of her the next day wouldn't desire anything.

But in that case, what should he buy her?

As he worried, he looked at the townspeople.

It wasn't that there weren't nobles in resplendent dresses, but everyone seemed to be wearing clothes that were easy to move in. And as far as footwear went, there were a lot of boots, sandals, and things easy to run in.

Nephie had a dragging dress and sharp-heeled shoes, so walking around the town shopping seemed like it would be difficult.

"...Hmm, for now, let's pick out some clothes."

"...Clothes...?"

"Yeah, it's hard to move in that outfit, right?"

She'd staggered on the stairs yesterday, and had held the hem of the skirt up as she walked today. Nephie blinked as if she'd been told something unbelievable, but didn't seem to be curious or displeased.

While he regretted not asking the driver where women's clothes were sold, he soon found a store that seemed to sell them after walking a little. It seemed to specialise in travelling wear, but a complete set of women's clothing was decorating a wooden mannequin. They would probably sell something usable as everyday wear.

Zagan opened the door, and the shop suddenly fell silent. Apparently seeing a mage's clothing had put them on guard.

A young girl that seemed to be a saleswoman soon came forward. She was a

winged person, with green wings on her back, splendidly displaying the store's products on her body, with a name tag atop her full chest with 'Manuela' written on it.

The saleswoman — Manuela spoke with a tight smile.

"W-welcome. What kind of clothes are you looking for, sir mage?"

Frankly, it wasn't a particularly welcoming atmosphere, but he was honestly glad that a female employee had come forward.

Zagan pointed at Nephie behind him.

"Choose some appropriate clothes for her."

Manuela looked at Nephie and her mouth dropped open.

"Phwa, what a pretty girl..."

Apparently, even the same sex thought so. Though it wasn't about himself, for some reason, Zagan's mood improved.

However, Manuela's expression soon clouded as her gaze fell on the collar around her neck.

I really do need to get rid of that collar, huh.

Being faced with those gazes each time he entered a store, he wouldn't be able to even step outside. Being told she might run away if he were to remove the collar had nothing to do with it. Zagan wanted to save Nephie. Of course, he had the ulterior motive of wanting her to like him, but making her his by putting a collar on her had no meaning. That would doubtless lead to the terrified faces that always greeted him as a mage.

Nephie was taken by the saleswoman and disappeared into the store. Zagan wasn't sure where he should stand, so for now, he avoided the entrance and stood against the wall.

As he did, Manuela soon returned.

"Is this ensemble to your tastes?"

"Hmm... Wait, huh?"

Looking at Nephie as she returned from within the store, Zagan's eyes shot

open.

The only things wrapped around her bare flesh were leather belts.

So far as they went, they were in the shape of clothes. Her nipples and crotch were miraculously covered. But apart from that, everything was laid bare, her jewel-like skin, and the unexpectedly large swell of her breasts weren't covered in the slightest.

The collar was arranged to look like it was part of the outfit, and could even seem half artistic, but he hadn't made that kind of request at all. If there were any male customers or employees around, Zagan would have to gouge out their eyes.

Nephie reddened right to her pale ears and twisted her body as if to hide it.



It was an inconceivable reaction from her calmly lifting her skirt the night before. People that truly wanted to die would have no shame. From that point

of view, he was a little happy that she seemed to have a little more will to live, but this wasn't the time for that.

Her white hair swayed smoothly, and the girl covered her body.

"U-ummm... please... don't look..."

Nephie's voice, which seemed on the verge of vanishing, brought him back to himself, and Manuela seemed to puff out her chest in pride for some reason.

"How is it? I think it's a perfect combination, if I do say so myself."

"What's perfect about that!? I said to pick suitable clothes, didn't I?"

"Eh...? I tried to match them to your tastes..."

Just how was he seen?

Well, I am a villainous mage bringing a cute girl like this along with a collar around her neck.

The word mage itself was something like a synonym for evil. Thinking about it properly, the saleswoman's reaction was perfectly reasonable.

...No, even so he wouldn't think it would be these clothes.

Holding his head, Zagan spoke.

"Normal clothes that you need for everyday life."

"Eh... And I've got such a good base to work with."

Even as the saleswoman looked frankly disappointed, she once more took Nephie back into the store.

"Wait. Leave that thing in your hand behind."

Incorrigibly, Manuela was holding something sensational that looked like underwear. Nephie noticed that and her eyes started to well with tears. At Zagan's glare, even she held both hands up and backed off.

"N-no way. It was a joke, just a joke."

It didn't look like that in the slightest, and Zagan watched her leave suspiciously. The saleswoman let go of the clothes and Nephie seemed to relax from the bottom of her heart. Finally, Nephie returned after her second change.

"Now, what do you think?"

"Hoh..."

This time, Zagan couldn't help but let out a sigh of admiration.

She was wearing a deep blue dress, with an apron, decorated with fancy lace. Her feet were protected by boots that seemed easy to walk in. They were a servant's clothes, but he thought they were honestly lovely. Manuela began to explain, in apparent dissatisfaction.

"It's an orthodox maid style, but the dress and the apron are both made of silk, while also being usable as an attendant's clothing. The boots are also furnished with healing magic, and ease the burden of standing work."

It didn't look bad, and it seemed functional. Looking over it again, it seemed like a good product.

"How is it, Nephie?"

"If I receive it from you, master, I do not mind."

"...Oi, if you say that, you can wear the clothes from earlier again."

The winged employee next to her had a gleam in her eyes, as she pulled out the leather belt outfit. Nephie frantically shook her head, and he felt like it was the first time he'd seen her react so quickly.

"T-this is fine, master!"

"Indeed, then we'll go with this."

Manuela clicked her tongue in displeasure. What an ill-tempered employee.

After the bill was settled, she whispered something in Nephie's ear.

"How nice, your master treasures you."

Zagan couldn't hear what was said, but Nephie's eyes seemed to open slightly wider. And then, she nodded hesitantly.

"...It is."

Her expression seemed somehow happy.

Leaving the store behind, Zagan asked.

“What did the saleswoman say?”

“That you’re a good master.”

“She did?”

It was probably just putting it nicely, but he didn’t really see the need for her to go out of her way to say that. Regardless of Zagan’s tilted head, Nephe stroked her brand new clothes.

“Am I... treasured?”

Her voice shaking as to whether she could believe it, her words vanished into the wind with no one hearing them.



Now then, where to next?

Having changed into her new clothes, Nephe seemed able to walk much more easily. They should be fine walking here and there now. Then, he felt something pulling on his cuff.

Looking back, he saw Nephe had timidly grabbed the cuff of his robe. She herself didn’t seem to have noticed as she tilted her head in puzzlement.

I see, maybe she’s scared after that saleswoman messed with her.

When he thought of how she had resigned herself to whatever would be done to her yesterday, she was currently so charming that that happiness passed to him.

They continued walking carefully, Zagan in order to not shake her hand off, and with Nephe not realising what she was doing.

As they walked, the clamour of metal reached their ears. Looking that way, it seemed to be a blacksmiths. There were swords and armour for knights and soldiers, and a stack of other small metal constructions. Amongst them, was a slave collar.

“We’re going into that store.”

“Right.”

Zagan headed towards the blacksmiths, and Nephe followed him.

The inside was a workshop, merchandise was lined up along the walls and on shelves. Within, several men were hammering hot metal.

When he called out to the men, one of them shot up in surprise.

Well, that was a common reaction to a mage suddenly calling to you.

Ever so slowly, the man turned his head.

“W-what is it?”

“I’ve got something for you to look at.”

The one that came forward was a dwarven man. He didn’t have a beard, so Zagan couldn’t really tell his age. He looked like a boy, but he might be middle-aged. Dwarves were skilled with their hands, and their speciality was delicate ornaments and gadgets.

Zagan had Nephe stand in front of him.

“I’d like you to look at her collar... do you know how to remove it?”

Nephe shook suddenly, and then looked at him with a disbelieving face.

Huh? Oh yeah, did I tell her I’d remove the collar?

He had a feeling he hadn’t.

Even if he couldn’t remove it right away, knowing that he intended to would probably put her at ease, he despaired completely at his poor conversational skills.

Nephe timidly opened her mouth.

“Um, master...”

“With that collar, it’s like you’re always Marchosias’ property. That’s not something you need.”

Zagan covered his face as he spoke about Nephe as a ‘thing’ again. However, Nephe’s cheeks reddened slightly and she nodded.

“...Right.”

“...Indeed.”

He didn’t know what he was saying ‘indeed’ so, but it was all he could do to

answer with that.

Then, the dwarf swordsmith spoke sullenly.

“Remove it? This collar?”

“Yeah.”

“...Please desist with your jokes. It’s a magic tool is it not? We can’t hope to deal with that.”

Nephie’s shoulders slumped slightly, but Zagan already knew that much.

“I want to ask about its structure. If you break the lock, would you be able to remove it.”

The swordsmith examined the collar closely at that question.

Finally, he displayed the lock. Six shafts ran from the lump of metal with a keyhole and seemed to connect to the collar.

“Please look at this lock. It is fixed into the structure of the collar, if the lock were removed, the collar would fall apart. Normally, that is.”

The addendum of ‘normally’ probably meant that he didn’t know what was added to it with magic. Zagan nodded in return.

“Because magic is a power that overturns the concepts of nature, it is bound by its original nature. If it was built like that, the lock might even be a decoration.”

“And, this is difficult to say, but...” The swordsmith had a hesitant look, and as if he didn’t want Nephie to hear, he moved away from her and spoke quietly.

“It probably has a trap within it.”

“A trap?”

“Yes, if it’s not removed correctly, it will activate and... In the worst case, the little lady’s head might have something awful happen to it...”

He didn’t even want to think what that awful thing could be. That was probably why the swordsmith had prevaricated.

Removing it by force is dangerous after all then.

Zagan had more than enough strength to simply destroy the collar. However, it seemed that holding back was for the best with the collar being a remnant of a Demon Lord.

“I think it would be for the best to remove it with the original key.”

“Well, that’d be true.”

He knew that, but the auctioneers hadn’t been able to manage that.

I had an inkling, but...

However, it was the truth there was nothing he could do now.

For now, he’d found out what he wanted to, so he took several silver coins from his pocket, the change from buying Nephie’s clothes.

“Here, as thanks.”

“No, I haven’t done anything for a reward. And more importantly, I wouldn’t take it from you.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

With a pained smile, the dwarf swordsmith said.

“You saved me.”

Zagan tilted his head, not remembering it in the slightest.

“It’s already a year ago. My carriage was attacked, and you saved me and my daughter. We ran off in fear, but you let us go without getting angry. Please, forgive me.”

Apparently, in some mob he’d kicked around, there was a mage or something that had attacked him. And as a result, Zagan had saved him and his daughter — he was old enough to have a daughter. He didn’t intend to demand repayment, but he was thankful he didn’t have to pay now. Zagan softly returned the coins to his pocket.

“Then I’ll leave it here, but forget about that pointless thing, I don’t remember it either.”

He said that, feeling like it would distract from not giving him the coins, but the swordsmith had an amused smile.

"I won't forget it. Come here anytime if you need something."

So saying, he saw them off, and Zagan and Nephie left the store behind.

What's with today?

The people around were so friendly it felt creepy. It probably wasn't just that he had Nephie with him.

Zagan hadn't noticed. That his face which usually seemed to hate everything was set in a much softer expression now.



After that, by the time they had finished their shopping, the sun was beginning to set. It was impossible, he couldn't go back to the castle and make Nephie cook, so they entered a small diner.

Perhaps because it wasn't really the time, there weren't many customers. Including them, there were about ten people there. The wooden floor creaked sharply every time the employees walked, echoing up to the ceiling. Lamps hung from the rafters, softly lighting each table.

He didn't know anything in the menu — for Zagan, even the names of pieces of cuisine were unknown — but ordered something that seemed like it was meat, something like a salad, and bread.

He didn't often eat vegetables, but Nephie had a figure that made it impossible to think she only ate meat.

As they were waiting for their food, he noticed Nephie seemed to want to say something.

"What is it?"

"I, umm..."

She mumbled, then touched her collar.

"Do you intend to remove this collar, master?"

"Hm? Oh yeah, I didn't say. I do."

He'd put it ambiguously earlier, so she didn't seem to have been able to confirm it. Being asked that up front was somehow embarrassing, and Zagan

answered bluntly. He wasn't able to give any assurances like 'of course!'

Nephie opened and closed her mouth several times in apparent conflict, but no words came out.

Even so, she seemed to resolve herself, and the girl in a maid uniform opened her mouth.

"If I didn't have the collar, don't you think... I'd run away?

Nephie was an elf, and a white-haired one that had huge amounts of magic. If she didn't have the collar, she'd probably be able to use magic.

It was this collar that was the proof she was bound under Zagan.

Zagan had tried to have it removed at the blacksmiths.

Well, it's not like it doesn't bother me.

Of course, Zagan had thought of that risk. A girl that he had spent the ridiculous sum of one million pieces of gold to obtain running away wasn't a laughing matter. He would be ruined, both as a man, and as a mage.

And he thought that might happen.

Different from Zagan, Nephie had no reason to support herself.

However, even so, even if she were to run away —

Even so, I want to remove it.

Zagan couldn't seem to put those feelings into words. So what came from his mouth in the end was:

"Hmph, either way, I can't remove it right now. Don't get your hopes up pointlessly."

He held his head in his hands.

Why couldn't he have at least said 'Even so, I want to remove it'?

It's probably because I want her to stay by my side.

That was probably why he'd said not to hope, but there was no reason for the 'pointlessly'.

Was 'how to talk to girls' in some grimoire somewhere? He would be fine with

a scam right now, so he wished earnestly for someone to tell him that.

Yet, Nephe still nodded her head, seeming somewhat satisfied.

"I won't."

He had the feeling he'd said something awful to the girl, and dropped his head into his hands again. Though this time, his collapse was short-lived. Their food was soon delivered.

It was a meal that he'd never even seen before, but he'd seen it often in his dreams in the past. He couldn't remember the last time he'd used a knife and fork, but could at least remember how. Even as Zagan began to cut the meat, Nephe stared blankly at the food.

"What's wrong, don't you know how to use a spoon or fork?"

He remembered hearing about countries in the far east that used pieces of wood called 'chopsticks' to eat. The isolated northern lands of the elves might not use knives and forks.

He remembered that and asked, but Nephe shook her head with a shiver.

"No... that's not..."

"Then eat. It's not like you're full, is it?"

He asked harshly again, but Nephe was probably used to it, as she only looked curious, and not scared. If anything, he should have noticed earlier.

As a mage, Zagan could stave off his hunger with magic, but Nephe's magic was restrained by the collar. She didn't look like she had much stamina either, and she'd only eaten dried meat and milk since that morning, which couldn't even be called a meal.

As if affirming his words, Nephe's stomach let out a cute growl. Nephe's pointed ears went slightly red.

"Um... I can eat as well?"

"Is there a reason you couldn't?"

Or is this too simple a meal too?

But the reaction seemed different from that morning. Then, he suddenly

remembered her circumstances.

"...Is this the first time you've eaten like this perhaps?"

Nephie nodded deeply.

Right, I see... Nephie's the same...

Zagan had thought she was being stubborn at first, but finally felt he understood. She was the same as him. When he was powerless, homeless, and despairing at the world. So Zagan was able to answer as if it was nothing.

"Then don't worry about it. It's similar for me. Eat what you think looks tasty. There's no one here that you need to hold back in front of."

"...But."

"Just eat. It's a small restaurant, but it's much better than the dried meat this morning."

He said that, and lifted the meat to his mouth, but didn't really know the flavour.

Is she upset about the thing with the collar earlier? How should I invite her to eat normally later?

With those questions and worries, he couldn't even taste it.

Nephie brought a closed hand up before her mouth. The outer corners of her eyes dropped slightly, he might be imagining it, but it seemed like she was smiling.

Then, she put her hands together before taking her fork up.

"Thank you for the food."

The first thing she reached for was a tomato. She tried to stab it with her fork, but it didn't go well, and it slipped away. Her expression didn't change in the slightest, but the tips of her pointed ears reddened. It seemed like she was embarrassed in her own way.

"...Ngh."

Noticing Zagan's gaze, Nephie shook suddenly, and this time took up a spoon. She delicately scooped the tomato into the bowl-like depression in it, and finally

put it between her peach coloured lips.

“...?”

It rolled atop her tongue, and she made a curious expression. Almost certainly because it didn’t taste of anything.

You won’t taste it by licking it, chew it!

He wanted to give her some words of encouragement, but didn’t have any confidence he could say it nicely. And above all, Nephie would be embarrassed to be told that. Encouraging her in his heart, he watched her, and Nephie finally bit into the tomato.

There was the sound of something being crushed and juice gushing out, and Nephie’s eyes opened widely.

“H-how is it...?”

She moved her mouth in silence for a while, as if she couldn’t answer, then nodded deeply. At that moment, her pure-white hair fell down onto her chest.

“I think... it’s tasty.” She said, then shook her head as if the words weren’t enough and she rethought it. “It’s... the first time... I’ve eaten one.”

Come to think of it, she’d said she’d learnt to cook by ‘watching’, she might not have been in a situation where she could eat properly. He should probably lament that situation, but instead, he felt a well of empathy and his face relaxed.

“Do you like it?”

“I don’t... really know.” She said, and scooped another tomato up with the spoon. “I thought... it would be sweeter. But, it’s very juicy... It’s the first time I’ve eaten something like this.”

Ahh, small tomatoes do look like candy.

Zagan had thought they were candy too, and taken some from a store, when he tried to eat it, he was disappointed at its sourness. Then afterwards, he was caught by the owner and beaten heavily.

That’s right, she’s a girl, they like sweet things.

He had a feeling this was the first thing that could be called Nepie's preference that he knew. He'd try ordering her a sweet dessert or something later.

Whilst he thought about that, he reached out his fork for a tomato.

"Mgh..."

However, it slipped away, the same as it had for Nepie.

He tried a second time, and a third, but he couldn't get it. Thinking about it properly, he didn't normally use a fork. He had just decided to switch to the spoon when that tomato was gently scooped up on Nepie's spoon.

She held that spoon out to Zagan.

"...Go ahead."

"Wha...t...?"

Zagan's eyes shot open.

Is this... being fed...?

He'd seen it once, somewhere in the past. A man and woman that seemed to have a good relationship fed each other sweets — though it was tomatoes here.

Back then, he'd felt a hatred he couldn't explain, and hadn't held any particular feelings towards it. To think that the day would come where he would be faced with it.

Her face was calm, but the tips of Nepie's ears had gone bright red. As he had stared for a while, her cheeks had flushed as well.

That aside, isn't this the spoon that's touched Nepie's mouth?

Could he put that in his own mouth?

Tense, Zagan moved his mouth to the spoon. The tomato rolled into his mouth. He bit into it and the sour juice filled his mouth.

"...It's delicious."

"...It is." Then, Nepie whispered appealingly. "Master, you haven't ordered me to do anything."

"T-that's right."

Before now, he wasn't sure how to talk to her. Even though he thought he wanted to give her a role, he didn't know what to order her to do.

Nephie's expression still didn't change, but she nodded as if affirming something to herself.

"Master... I want to be of use to you... will you allow me to be?"

That was the instant where Nephie first requested something for herself. However, he oddly couldn't feel any attempt to flatter him in her words. Surely, even having a desire would cause her to hesitate.

And yet, it wasn't for her that she asked, but for me?

Zagan could naturally answer, for that time alone.

"I will. You may do as you wish, Nephie."

...In the end, he could only say it haughtily.

However, Nephie nodded with a serious face.

"I will, I shall give my best efforts."

It was a rather formal answer, but even so, he was happy she was showing her own will.

"R-right. Please do."

Zagan stabbed at a tomato again, and this time managed it. He went to move it to his mouth, but then his thoughts stopped, and he presented it to Nephie.

"Mmm?"

Nephie tilted her head slightly as if she didn't understand his action.

Didn't you just do that yourself?

Did she do it without realising? She seemed a bit too embarrassed for that though. However, Zagan was embarrassed too. He stayed like that for a long time, and even with magic, it was hard to keep it up.

"You like them, right? You can eat it."

It was at him saying that, that Nephie finally realised he was repaying her for

earlier. It wasn't just her ears, her cheeks went red as well, even so, she slowly opened her mouth.

Her bright white teeth were visible through her peach lips. The tongue that poked forth from them seemed strangely coquettish. The tip of her tongue touched the bright red tomato, and it rolled into her mouth as she seemed to let a gasp out. After it left the fork, the juice inside rolled along her chin.

Seeming unable to bear the embarrassment, Nephie covered her face.

It felt like he was teasing her. However, rather than regretting it, he wanted to see more of that expression.

"How is it?"

He asked ostentatiously, and Nephie nodded seriously through the gaps in her fingers.

"...It's... tasty."

"...It is."

However, the exchange between them was observed by everyone inside the restaurant, and realising that fact, the two got flustered and ended up having to leave the store behind.

The clumsy pair calmed down for the time being by recognising their master/servant relationship.

Chapter 3 — The Quiet ones are Devastatingly Terrifying when Angry

This was a week ago, on the morning of the day Zagan and Nephie met.

In the trade city of Kianoides, there had recently been a series of kidnappings targeting young girls. The culprits were a group of mages, and it seemed they were using the girls as sacrifices to enact horrifying magic.

Chastel and her detachment were a squad sent to subjugate those criminals.

The main mage involved with the incident defeated, the captured girls saved, their triumphant return — it was just before that. They had entrusted the rescued girls to their reinforcements from the church, and just as they were on the verge of returning to Kianoides, Chastel had just taken an early-morning bath and wasn't wearing her armour.

The man who had been protecting her until then suddenly drew his blade and turned on his allies. While she had managed to escape with her other allies' aid, with no weapons, she was soon cornered.

However, the man was someone else, a mage that skinned people. Their husks would be found, washed up in the river in the future.

Chastel should have had a similar... no, an even worse fate awaiting her, but she was saved by 'someone'.

I'm sure... it wasn't a dream.

The man had far crueler eyes than the man that had attacked her. In truth, he had killed the attacker as he begged for his life without hesitation, even if he was a heretic.

However, she still thought.

He seemed... kind of lonely.

With a little investigation, she soon knew that he was a mage called Zagan. Since then, she hadn't been able to think of anything but him for some reason. That's right, that morning, the one that was attacked while lost in the forest,

and saved by Zagan, even if he had doused her in blood, was Chastel.

She shook out her red hair, and slumped forward onto her desk.

“Haah...”

And then, let out that sigh.



"Does something trouble you, Holy Knight Captain Chastel?"

Chastel shot up as she was addressed from behind.

"I-I beg your pardon, your holiness, Clavell."

Standing there was an old man, wearing the robes of the top-ranking priests. He was a Cardinal, actually one of the most highly placed in the church, and he was Chastel's direct superior. The old man gave a gentle smile and shook his head.

"Don't be so formal. If I were to have the hero that subjugated the perpetrators of those kidnappings humble herself to me, I would be faced with hostility from the people. To say nothing of the fact that you are the Maiden of the Holy Sword, no?"

'Maiden of the Holy Sword', that was the title Chastel had been given. The name of one given one of the strongest swords of the church, that sliced through magic circles and nullified magic, and if twelve were gathered, were said to even be able to defeat a Demon Lord.

Currently, unlike when she was saved by Zagan, she was clad in her blessed armour, with a large sword, about as long as she was tall, resting next to her. It was both equipment for fighting mages, and her full dress uniform for formal places such as this.

"...I lost four holy knights assigned to me by you, your holiness. It was as a result of my inexperience, how could I accept honours for that?"

Maias, Emilio, Jamil, and Dolan, they were proud and gallant holy knights. That morning, they had fought against the mages without even a surprise attack, and won. It was Chastel's negligence after all of the kidnappers had been defeated that caused the tragedy.

The aged Cardinal shook his head affectionately.

"It is not your fault. The ones you should hate are the mages that use foul magic. You avenged your comrades and returned, you can hold your head high."

"...Right."

Chastel nodded with a conflicted expression.

She wasn't the one that avenged her comrades, it was a passing mage. If he

hadn't been there, Chastel wouldn't be here now. And yet, Chastel was the one acknowledged.

Chastel was a devout believer, but also understood that the church wasn't as holy an organisation as it claimed. She was made a Holy Knight Captain because of her aptitude with the holy sword, but had no intention of abandoning her own beliefs. If she were to put it into words, she intended to stick to the distinction of not doing so.

The Cardinal stared steadily at her.

"Chastel, you have been researching the mage Zagan, have you not?"

"I have."

Chastel answered clearly, with a nod.

"The one who took Maias' place and attacked us called himself Zagan."

The mage that had attacked Chastel had called himself that.

But, Zagan was the mage that saved me.

In other words, he'd falsified his name and committed evils. The desire to prove his innocence was one of the reasons Chastel had investigated him. She faced the Cardinal and spread out the documents she had researched.

"However, when I investigated, I found that Zagan was another mage that was completely unrelated."

The Cardinal nodded as if he knew that.

"Most likely, it is a mage known as Face Skinner. As the name would imply, he skins people and performs foul magic, there is a subjugation order out for him. Somehow, it seems that he was supporting this kidnapping too." At that, she understood that the Cardinal had been investigating this as well. "Chastel, this matter is not over. Our investigation shows that there is still a true perpetrator at large other than the mage."

"...Has there been another victim?"

The Cardinal shook his head comfortingly.

"Calm yourself, Chastel. Through your efforts, the mages' plan was indeed

prevented... However, investigating the mages' hideout made it clear that the true perpetrator has been overlooked by us.

There was still a survivor other than the one that had attacked Chastel.

Will I still be able to avenge my comrades?

As she swallowed at the tension, the Cardinal solemnly spoke the name.

"The mage Zagan is a mage that has been gathering power at a terrifying pace over recent years."

"Wha—" Chastel called out without meaning to. "That man can't be the culprit."

"This unrelated mage's name has come up twice within the same incident. It is too much to be a coincidence." With that, the Cardinal proclaimed in a heavy voice. "Mages are evil. They must be destroyed. Even if he is unrelated to this incident, it makes no difference to our judgement of evil. Therefore, we of the Kianoides branch of the church have determined that the mage Zagan must be eliminated."

"Hck."

That was the precept that the church held up as something that must be absolutely adhered to. You could possibly call it a curse.

The church will hunt mages until they are destroyed.

Even if Zagan was being framed, once the church decided to hunt him, they wouldn't repeal that decision. Even if the holy sword wielders like Chastel were defeated, even in the face of thousands and tens of thousands of corpses, the church wouldn't stop until the mage was killed.

There was no meaning in Chastel claiming his innocence here. In fact, she could be seen as a traitor, and put on trial as a heretic.

I do not hold my life above all else, but it would be the same as doing nothing.

If she wanted to return the favour of him saving her life, she couldn't be so foolish as to rant and be caught here. She should take measures to protect him, or to let him go free.

After holding her eyes closed for a while, Chastel opened her mouth with resolution.

"In which case, your holiness. Please, give me, Captain Chastel of the Holy Knights the mission to subjugate this Zagan. Allow me the opportunity to atone for the dishonour of my past mistakes."

The Cardinal let out an "Ohhh..." of admiration at those words.

"Well said. That truly is the captain of my holy knights, the Maiden of the Holy Sword."

Chastel might be ruined. But even so, she had her convictions.

Things she couldn't yield on, even if she ended up turning her back on the church. Even if no one would thank her, even if the people of the world spat on her, she would choose death over throwing away her convictions for herself.

It was this that had meant she was given the power of a holy sword at a mere seventeen years old.

And besides, she thought.

That man... had awfully lonely eyes.

They were eyes like that of a stray dog, that wanted warmth in the bottom of its heart, but didn't admit that and pushed everything away. So much so that it made her think the one that truly needed saving then may well have been him, and not her... So, Chastel took that duty as her own.



"Are you awake, master?"

Zagan generally slept while sitting. His throne was the centre of the bounded fields, and a place where he could focus on all of their functions. If he sat there, then however he was attacked, he wouldn't lose his life to a single attack. And above all, if something suspicious approached, it would immediately let him know. In other words, the throne was a place of even stronger protection within the already strong protection.

And if anything happened, he could react quicker if he was sitting rather than lying down, so sleeping here became his custom.

It was that morning.

“Good morning, master.”

Nephie greeted him, dressed in an attendant’s clothing. She hadn’t woken him.

“R-right.”

Zagan answered, and Nephie gave a swift bow.

“Breakfast has been prepared in the dining room, will you be eating?”

“Eh, breakfast? That you made?”

“Yes.”

She had certainly said that she would cook yesterday morning, but to think that she’d do so immediately the following day. Then, he had a sudden doubt.

“Were you waiting there the whole time?”

“I was.”

“...Wake me in that kind of situation.”

“You were fast asleep.”

Zagan thought doubtfully at being told that.

Come to think of it, it’s strange for me to not wake up with someone right in front of me.

Just a day without sleep wouldn’t make him sleep that deeply. Even as he cocked his head in thought, he realised Nephie had been standing there, stock still.

“Isn’t it tiring, standing there?”

“It was okay, I think it’s because of the magic in the boots.”

The saleswoman at the clothes shop *had*

said that they reduced fatigue. They seemed to be rather effective.

“Did you just do that the entire time you were waiting?”

“No, I looked at your face, master.”

"I-I see..."

Zagan covered his face when she said that straight to him. That aside, she'd gone out of her way to make breakfast, he couldn't make her wait for so long.

"You mentioned breakfast, right?"

"I did."

Zagan stood up, and Nephie bowed as she moved out of the way.

She was already acting like a professional maid.

As he went to head to the dining room, Zagan let out an 'ah.'

"What is it?"

"One minute, Nephie."

"Yes."

Zagan scratched the back of his neck as he awkwardly spoke to the girl that had tilted her head.

"...Morning, Nephie."

The words he couldn't return right away yesterday. Nephie blinked twice in surprise, then spoke, somewhat happily.

"Yes, good morning, master."

It felt strange, like the inside of his chest had warmed up.



Descending to the entrance hall, and then opening the right-hand door brought them to the dining room. The large room had a single table, big enough for twelve people to be seated at, and a wondrous chandelier hung above. This had been a graveyard-like place, full of spider webs and skeletons, but was now so clean that it was as if that was a lie. Even the tablecloth looked like new, with not a single wrinkle upon it.

It seemed like Nephie was a girl that worked fast once she had been given a job. Lined up on the now clean table were an oiled salad and soft, fluffy bread. As he thought that there was an empty dish, Nephie poured some heated soup

into it. It seemed that she'd even considered and prepared for Zagan not waking up immediately.

There wasn't a large amount, but even Zagan could tell that it was a nutritionally well-balanced meal. And then, he tilted his head.

"Huh? Did we buy bread yesterday?"

"No, I baked it earlier."

"You can make bread? By yourself?"

Nephie tilted her head in turn, like a small bird, at Zagan's incredulity.

"Is that strange?"

"I don't know. This is the first time I've met someone that can make this kind of thing. At the very least, there's no one around me that can make something this delicious looking."

"I see."

She murmured monotonously, but Zagan didn't miss the tips of her pointed ears twitching.

Is she happy, perhaps?

He remembered the tips of her ears went red when she was embarrassed. They said that the eyes said as much as the mouth, but in Nephie's case, perhaps her ears would be the easiest to understand. Even as he thought pleasantly on his discovery, he noticed that Nephie was still standing. The only thing on the table was Zagan's portion.

"Nephie, have you already eaten?"

"I have not."

"Then eat with me."

He supposed just him eating made him feel uncomfortable. Nephie moved slightly as if she was troubled by something.

"What's up?"

"I... only made enough for you, master."

It really was just like her. Setting a pure girl like her free, she couldn't take a meal for herself.

"Then we can split it in half, right?"

He tore the bread in half. The freshly baked bread was still slightly warm, and separated into two like pulling threads. A savoury scent tickled his nose, and he let out a sound of appreciation without realising it.

However, Nephie still didn't move to take a seat.

"Why not sit?"

"...Um, there wasn't enough time... to prepare more than a seat for you, master."

The room was originally so filthy you couldn't take a meal in it. After not only cleaning the room, but cooking as well, of course she wasn't able to prepare seats.

Zagan would have sat without caring if it was dirty, but the other chairs had all been put away.

I could sit on the table and give her the chair... no, I can't sit on the table that she's cleaned.

However, there wasn't another chair to be found. They could each use half of the chair, but the chair wasn't that generous, and he could see them both falling on the floor.

No, she can sit, right?

They couldn't each use half of the chair, but what about sitting on his lap? Nephie shouldn't weigh enough to be painful for the time it took to eat, and they could both eat, so wasn't it a good idea?

Zagan may still have been half asleep from just waking up. So he didn't doubt himself that that was the best solution. Confirming his thoughts to himself, he nodded with a hmm.

"Then, you can sit here."

"B-by here...?"

Nephie faltered.

Zagan mercilessly pointed to his lap as Nephie let a confused question out.

At Zagan telling her to sit on his lap, Nephie's deep blue eyes wavered and widened, and even her pure-white hair seemed to bounce up. From her reaction, Zagan finally realised he had said something strange.

Huh? Wait, isn't sitting in my lap essentially the same as hugging?

Coming back to himself, even Zagan wanted to die at what he'd said. The girl dressed as a maid resolutely opened her mouth.

"I would never do something so rude."

Well of course not.

That was the best answer in this situation. Zagan just had to nod and it would all be solved. But, in the face of Nephie's quick-witted answer, a shaken Zagan was even more pointlessly obstinate.

"Don't worry about it. I'm fine with it."

What am I being stubborn about hereeeee!?

Was it that he didn't want to admit his faults or something? If there was something that could be torn off, he wanted it to be those lips of his.

"B-but..."

The tips of Nephie's ears went red, and seeing her face slightly tear up...

What is this? I want to corner her a little more.

Of course, he knew it was mean, but he wanted to see more of such a moving sight. Zagan cleared his throat and one more patted his lap.

"Hurry up, the food will go cold."

"Kuh..." Or with some other kind of faint sigh, her pointed ears drooped. She seemed resigned. "As you command... master..."

Timidly, Nephie sat on Zagan's lap.

She actually sat down!

The soft sensation of her rear passed through her skirt. He wanted to hug and

stroke her from behind. Zagan couldn't help but let out a gulp. But as the one that gave the order, he feigned calm and tore off a piece of bread.

"There, you can eat."

"...It's embarrassing, master..."

Nephie's ears had gone red right to their bases.

"Hmm, you'd get it if you could see."

"...You're mean... master..." Nephie let out in a near-crying voice, and then moved her face to Zagan's hand, and from there, took the piece of bread between her peach lips. "Um, I can eat the rest myself, so..."

"R-right."

He wanted to see more of her embarrassment, but Zagan soon reached his mental limit for guilt and embarrassment himself. Then, he noticed Nephie's ears quivering slightly. She was embarrassed at it, but it didn't seem like she hated it that much. Somewhat relieved, Zagan spoke.

"Next time, make food for yourself too."

"...I will."

"Well, we can do this next time too."

"I'll prepare it."

She answered firmly.

Zagan went to have some soup while it was still warm, but Nephie stole the spoon from the side.

"Nephie?"

His eyebrows furrowed, and the maid-uniformed girl lifted some soup with the spoon. She cooled it by blowing on it, then raised it to Zagan.



"Please, go ahead, master."

Her expression was as blank as always, but she seemed somewhat angry.

So she's getting even, huh.

But, how should he put it? It seemed like it was embarrassing for her too. The tips of her ears were practically alight, and the hand she held the spoon with was trembling slightly, and when he thought of her blowing on the soup to cool it, it felt more like a reward than a reprisal.

I've got a feeling I'd like to do this every time too.

So Zagan opened his mouth as he was bid. With clumsy movements, Nephe moved the spoon to his lips. It looked like the soup was lamb and root vegetables, boiled in milk, but it seemed to warm him from his stomach as it flowed down his throat.

"It's warm."

"What?"

"Ah, you know, the soup?"

Of course, Nephe sitting on his lap was also warm, but Zagan frantically denied that. Nephe looked blankly at him, but finally nodded slowly.

"...Yes. It's... warm."

She said, as if she was chewing something.

I hope that we can keep going like this.

He thought from his heart.



That day ended while cleaning Nephe's room. She had said that she would clean herself, but moving heavy things like the furniture with her slender arms would be difficult, so Zagan carried the bed, wardrobe and things.

That aside, her clothing right now amounted to the dress she wore at first, her maid outfit, and several pairs of underwear. He wanted to get a few more things for her.

I need to think of a way to make money too.

Selling his knowledge of magic was a way he could get vast amounts of money, but it also had the disadvantage of being easily tracked. It might be

possible if he was alone, but if he crossed the church and something happened to Nephie, then even killing all the enemies wouldn't bring her back.

In which case, hiring himself out to people like the bandits' accomplice the other day would be quick and easy, but that would mean long hours, and days where he couldn't return to the castle.

While there were things money couldn't buy, it was the truth that having no money would mean they would live in want. They still had a little left from the reward for helping the carriage the previous day, so needing to eat wouldn't suddenly become a problem, but he needed to think of something, quickly.

And so, several days passed with them cleaning up the castle like that.

Nephie asked Zagan, who had spread grimoires all over the archives.

"Master, what are you always researching?"

Even with his life with Nephie being like a dream, Zagan didn't forget his study of magic. She handled the cooking and cleaning so well, that even if he helped her a little, he actually made more progress than before.

Zagan tilted his head back at her in question.

"What, does it look like something other than magic?"

"I... think so, but I don't understand what meaning drawing that picture has."

At this, Zagan's eyes went wide.

"Is elf magic different than this?"

Nephie shook her head, her pure white hair following the movement.

"I cannot use magic."

That was a completely unforeseen answer.

Even though she was supposed to have much better mana than humans.

He thought, regrettfully. But with that being the case, Zagan pointed at the magic circle he was drawing.

"This is a magic circle. It's a 'blueprint' to cause the phenomena the mage wishes."

"A... blueprint?"

It seemed like that was a word she hadn't heard before.

"That's right. There was a water wheel, or a carriage in town, right? Unlike simple blades and hammers, they're made of lots of parts. If those parts don't come together, it won't work, so to fit them together, you record the measurements and such in a blueprint."

A carriage used countless pieces of wood, nails, and metal fixings, from the size of the wheel, the door, all the way to the seats. A water wheel was even more complex, the gears had to mesh, with their size and the number of teeth. That wasn't something you could do by practice, you needed a diagram anyone could understand at a glance.

Nephie nodded in understanding.

"Magic is actually no different from doing that kind of thing. First, you draw the blueprint called a magic circle like this," As he said that, Zagan drew out a crest in the dust on the floor with his finger, "these symbols are concepts that have power. The cross that the church lifts is the same kind of thing. People say that these things are characters left by the gods, and proof of contracts with demons, but I don't know if that's actually true."

Or perhaps the thoughts of humanity, that believed there were gods and power within them gave rise to that power. If you came into contact with magic, you'd understand that the world is a vague and uncertain thing. Next, he enclosed the symbol in a circle.

"This is the simplest form of magic circle. This one causes a flash of lightning, if you pour mana into it, this is what happens."

"Eh, uhm."

Nephie probably didn't expect him to use it here and let out a panicked cry. Even so, Zagan touched the circle and some small sparks scattered around with a crackle. Nephie seemed to blink in disappointment after bracing herself.

"That... is lightning?"

"Yeah. Well, it soon disperses into the atmosphere, so it doesn't really look

like it.”

“Hahh...”

Zagan let out a laugh at her not completely satisfied response.

“That alone is just like floating leaves on water. Just striking flint doesn’t make a fire, right? So here we add a symbol for the effectiveness, one to determine the power, one to determine the range, one to determine the length of time, and so on.” He drew several symbols surrounding the one for lightning, making yet another circle around them. “And now it’s finally a circle that will make something like the real thing.”

“Hya!”

He added mana to it, and this time, a streak of lightning came from the ceiling. Zagan let out a laugh at Nepheie’s small scream.

“Sorry, sorry. But, just doing this makes a circle anyone can use by adding mana. If you go to the trouble of drawing a circle and your enemy can steal it before you can use it yourself, there’s no point. So next you add restrictions so only you can use it.”

In a manner of speaking, it was magic to protect magic.

When Barbarus had infiltrated the bounded fields, and when Zagan had nullified the enemy’s magic, they had rewritten these parts and taken the magic circle over.

“If you don’t make it complex, other mages can take it over easily. It’s here where a mage’s skill is visible. And, a magic circle made like this is called a ‘circuit’.”

How efficiently a mage could surround the crest at the core of the circle with a strongly defended circuit showed their strength. Replacing magic circle with a spell could be called another of those methods.

There, Nepheie stared intently at the magic circle.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, you added the ‘circuit’ outside, but is it possible to add it inside?”

Zagan made an appreciative sound.

"Good eye. The answer is that it's impossible, but it's possible." Nephe cocked her head as if he was talking double Dutch. He continued in an amused voice. "Adding more to the inside of a magic circle makes another magic circle, which disrupts the flow of mana, meaning it might not work, or might activate spontaneously. However, magic itself is in the flow of mana, so it should be possible in theory."

Nephe fell into thought for a while, and then opened her mouth, not seeming quite sure of herself.

"Would that be controlling magic that has already been activated?"

This time, Zagan's eyes opened wide.

"That's right. And if a mage could do that, no magic would reach them."

Magic attacks would all become a source of power for that mage. It was different from taking over a magic circle, it was like waiting to see what your opponent chose before you played rock, paper, scissors. And because they would be able to activate magic as they wished, there would be no defending against it.

"In other words, in theory, they'd be the strongest mage."

Though he said that, Zagan shrugged.

"Theory is theory. If it was that simple, no one would have any troubles."

"...? Mages lengthen their lifespan, and claim that everything is possible from researching magic. Are there still things it cannot do?"

"Rather than that, it's because no one researches that seriously."

Nephe tilted her head again, as if she didn't understand even more.

"Mages aren't warmongers like soldiers and knights. They research for things like perpetual youth, because they wonder how far magic can go, and to find out if it's possible to resurrect the dead."

In other words, mages only thought of themselves in all things. Someone who only wanted for themselves would have no reason to compete with others.

"Of course, there are those that hire themselves out like the mage from the other day, and those that participate in wars. However, even if that's a method they use, it's not their goal. Magic research needs money, so they just do it to get that money."

Nephie opened her mouth, seeming reluctant to say something.

"...I've heard... about using magic... to torture people."

"Yeah, there are morons who do that to pass the time. But they don't just learn magic for that. There's plenty of more efficient methods for torture than magic."

Tools for torture had a long history, getting secrets from people and making them confess had been necessary long into the past. It had been cleaned up a lot, but there was a mountain's worth of torture implements in the castle, because there were magics which used people's suffering and hatred as reagents.

"Going back to the topic, that 'strongest mage' from earlier would have magic to fight mages. It might be useful to steal other mages research, but it wouldn't be of any more help. So no one researches it."

Well, it's not like there aren't idiots that research it...

But there was no reason to speak of that, so he stayed silent.

Nephie nodded in apparent understanding at the explanation thus far.

However, she murmured like there was something she wasn't fully satisfied with.

"I feel like I understand the logic of magic, but..."

"What? Go ahead."

Nephie spoke, puzzled.

"However, wouldn't anyone be able to use magic if they understood the structure?"

Nephie has a good sense for magic that's got nothing to do with being an elf.

If she didn't have that collar, Zagan was sure she'd make an excellent mage.

Possibly one even better than him.

Zagan nodded in pride at his excellent student with that sharp insight.

"Yeah, that's right. We mages gain knowledge, but gaining power follows directly. How efficiently and effectively you can use it depends on skill."

Zagan wasn't born as a mage. The reason he was able to become a well-known mage at a mere eighteen years old was that he stole the knowledge from 'a certain mage'.

It's been about ten years since then, huh...

It happened when he was eight, but it wasn't related to the current conversation, so he shook his head and continued.

"So mages pull all kinds of tricks and set traps so their research isn't stolen... Make sure you're careful touching things in this room, okay?"

"...Hch"

At that, Nephe went bolt upright in surprise.

"I'm joking. I made sure the traps wouldn't go off for you."

"...You're mean, master."

Her voice held a subtle note of both relief and reprisal, and then, the tips of her pointed ears started to shiver in happiness.

"Hmm? You seem happy, did something good happen?"

"Hee?" At Zagan's questioning tilt of his head, Nephe shot up in a panic, and then touched her face in puzzlement. "How... can you tell?"

"Well, you'd probably get it if you could see."

This time, her ears drooped, and then lifted up and shivered back and forth. The shaking was probably because she was happy.

As she covered her face, she looked up timidly through her fingers at Zagan. Like that, her expression itself didn't change, so he admired it as all the more helpful.

And then, she spoke shyly.

"It's because it's the first time... you've spoken to me like this, master..."

He knew that his own face had gone red, and at the same time, he was filled with a strong sense of regret.

That's right! I can never help talking around the point!

In the same way as Zagan was troubled when he couldn't read Nephie's expressions, she was probably troubled when she didn't know what he wanted to say.

He cleared his throat with a cough and calmed himself.

"Well, magic's all I've got, I can talk more easily about my field of expertise."

"Right."

He didn't know what she was nodding in agreement to, but she seemed happy even without looking at her ears. Then, she opened her mouth somewhat hesitantly.

"Master, may I ask a question?"

When she spoke so formally like this, it was when she had resolved herself to question him.

Zagan straightened himself and nodded.

"What is it? Go ahead."

"You already seem to have a great deal of power. Yet you are researching to gather more."

She paused here, and gulped before continuing.

"Master, what do you want when you have that power?"

Zagan couldn't immediately answer her question.

What do I want... when I have that power...?

What did he want, that he gathered power for?

Nephie's expression clouded.

"I apologise, I should not have asked such a thing."

"No, that's not it." Scratching the back of his neck, Zagan spoke hesitantly. "I just, haven't really thought about it."

"Haven't... thought about it?"

How foolish it sounded, having it repeated. Zagan let his gaze drift through the air as he nodded.

"If I had to say, I guess... to live?"

Nephie's breath caught.

"To... live?"

"Yeah. Back when I was a kid, I didn't have money or a place to live, I lived by stealing, back in those days, I couldn't go against strong people like adults, but it was still good, because I wasn't killed." Thinking back on it now, he felt they were all good people. He was stuffed in a cell, but he was still fed, and wasn't killed. "Then one day, I was caught by a mage. Even if I wasn't an elf like you, a brat would make a decent sacrifice."

"Hck."

As he said it, he thought it was rash. Nephie had been caught like that, and it wouldn't have been long ago. But it would have been unnatural to stop there, so Zagan hurriedly continued.

"Well, just before he killed me, I got an opening and managed to kill him instead, and then I realised that if I wanted to live, I needed power. So I wanted to get stronger. That's probably what I want, I guess it sounds cliched, but to be perpetually youthful."

Perhaps in disappointment, Nephie held her chest and hung her head.

"...I couldn't... be that strong..."

Zagan and Nephie's circumstance truly were similar. And because she didn't get the opportunity to become stronger, she might be looking down on herself.

Zagan boldly began to talk.

"Hey, Nephie."

"Yes, master?"

"If you've got an interest in magic—"

As he spoke, Zagan's expression became grim.

"What is it?"

"...It seems we have a guest. I'll go to greet them, you prepare dinner, please."

"Certainly, how many people should I prepare for?"

"Just me and you is fine. They'll be leaving soon anyway."

Zagan left Nephie tilting her head in the archives.

With no power, you can't live.

He'd had that carved into his mind, all too deeply.



"There's a mage's dwelling here..."

A knight spoke in bewilderment.

Four men and women had entered the forest around the castle, three were men, and one was a woman. The men were in their twenties and thirties, and all clearly skilled holy knights. The three men were guarding the woman. But the one that felt it a nuisance was the one they were protecting.

She was still at the age she could be called a girl, but she had a large sword on her back.

It was clearly unfeasible for her to wield it with her slender arms, but she was wearing 'baptised armour', one of the tools of the church. Those that wore it could have physical abilities on par with a mage.

The swords that the church's knights — holy knights wielded were strong against magic, exorcist swords could even cut through a mage's defences, but the sword the girl held was clearly letting off a different level of power.

The rumoured holy sword, huh...

He thought he recognised the girl's face, but he was more concerned with the holy sword, so couldn't remember who she was.

One of the knights grumbled.

"The true kidnapper, huh? To think he lived here."

"...That isn't certain yet. That's why we are here, to confirm that."

Hearing the knights' conversation, Zagan understood.

That's right, Barbarus said that they thought I was one of the culprits too.

They seemed to be here in the name of subjugating that perpetrator. It was good that they were off the mark, but because they knew that, the church wouldn't withdraw.

They judged mages themselves as evil and their enemies. Proving his innocence wouldn't change that. Zagan was a mage, and therefore must be destroyed.

The other knight laughed at the girl's remonstrating voice.

"That's our Maiden of the Holy Sword, Chastel, compassionate even to mages."

"We're proud to be able to fight with you, Lady Chastel."

The knights praised her extravagantly, and the girl had a conflicted expression.

And there, the knights stopped.

"This thicket again, we can't go any further."

It seemed that one of the bounded fields against intruders was causing them difficulty, they had lost their sense of direction and were orbiting the same place.

Zagan watched this scene from the trees.

Before him was the path to the castle. It was around where he'd saved the girl that was attacked by the mage the other day. The knights were confused at the fork in the path. Watching them, he had a sudden thought.

How did that mage break my field?

It was a bounded field that thwarted even holy knights. They couldn't have

gotten this far by accident and luck. Having said that, he didn't seem to have enough power to break Zagan's field, he was someone that had begged for his life when faced with Zagan.

That aside, it was the holy knights in front of him now.

It'd be nice if they'd give up here and go home.

Of course, they weren't so easily overcome.

"Move, please. It's probably a magic barrier. I'll..."

The girl stepped forth and drew the sword on her back. There was a strange symbol engraved on its blade. It was fairly different from those used for magic, but the logic behind it was much the same. If magic symbols were characters, it was like another country's characters.

That symbol shone weakly.

"Hah!"

The girl brandished her sword.

He knew that it had broken the fields covering the castle.

It took about half of it, huh.

There were still several left to strengthen him, but all the bounded fields to drive away invaders were destroyed with the swing.

In a single swing.

With the field to bedazzle the knights broken, Zagan was stuck having to appear in front of them.

"...Geez, don't the church's people have any manners when they visit someone?"

They finally noticed Zagan when he spoke, and the knights cried out in alarm. The men stood as if to protect the girl, but she waved them off.

She stared at Zagan directly and then murmured somewhat bitterly.

"...So it *is* you."

"Have we met?"

He did recognise her from somewhere, but...

He looked at the girl for a while and then finally remembered.

Right, the girl that was being killed.

She was a true beauty, but she didn't have her sword or baptised armour then, and her hair was tied up now, so she had a different hairstyle.

Even so, she carried the symbol of the church.

If I'd known she was a holy knight, I wouldn't have let her go like that.

He thought it was a failure, but to criticise her for that now would be unsightly. He decided not to touch on that.

"I don't know who you are or where you're from, but get lost, I'm busy."

Irritatedly raising his finger, he preemptively brought it down.

"Kyah?"

Following that, the knights, including the girl, had lightning rain down on them. The magic he'd used to vaporise the mage the other day.

If they're wearing baptised armour, they probably won't die.

Their armour was exceedingly protective. Half-hearted magic would bounce right back. Even so, Zagan had made allowances in his own way.

However—

"A surprise attack. So mages *are* nothing but cowards."

A knight carrying a large shield had protected the girl. The girl behind him was a given, but the other knights seemed to have been unaffected too.

Well, I suppose so.

As much as he disliked it, they had broken Zagan's bounded field, if this level of attack would have stopped them, they wouldn't have made it this far.

"...You're a bunch of idiots. Quit your bluffs and just go home."

Closing his eyes, he taunted them, tempting them to attack.

If I don't deal with this quickly, I'll be late for Nephie's dinner!

If he couldn't eat it fresh out of the oven, it wouldn't be fair to either him or Nephie.

"Kuh..."

Feeling his overwhelming drive, the girl backed off.

To fill that gap, the shield bearer and other two knights stepped forward.

"Lady Chastel, get back. We three knights of the Azure Sky will deal with a plebeian of this level."

Exaggeratedly naming themselves, the knights faced Zagan. Now that they mentioned it, their armour was indeed blue.

The man that cried out was rather large, and hoisted a shield, with an axe gripped in their right hand. Behind him was a spear-wielding knight that was tall and thin, and behind

him was a knight holding a longsword.

It seemed they used the shield to stop their opponents start, then contain them with the spear, before killing them with the longsword.

It was a rather common set of tactics, but it was so widely used because of just how effective it was. Against one opponent, it might even be called a perfect method.

However, Zagan scratched at his head as if they were only an irritant.

"So if I deal with you lot, you'll go home?"

At the apparently provocative words, the knights' faces were filled with anger.

"You impudent rat!"

The shield-bearer charged.

The shield and armour probably came to more than a hundred kilos. Even carrying that much weight, he was still as fast as a horse.

It was far from a human's abilities, it was the power of the holy knight's characteristic, the baptised armour. Like the armour, the shield had the symbol of baptism on it. Half-hearted magic would not destroy it, and he wasn't a slow enough enemy to have the chance to use bigger magic on.

"Fuhaha! You won't even have time to use magic."

Charging with his huge shield made him essentially a cannonball. Even a mage would be pulverised by a direct hit. And even if he withstood the shield, the long spear would be waiting for him. If he miraculously withstood the spear, he wouldn't be able to avoid the finishing blow from the longsword.

It was a setup for perfect victory, but Zagan calmly curled his right hand into a fist. He held that fist aloft as if he were going to throw a stone, and then swung it down at the shield.

The fist and shield crashed into each other. With a grin of victory, the knight yelled.

"You fool, get ready to d-"

In the next instant, the knight's shield shattered like glass.

The fist continued on and ploughed into his stomach.

"Heg...?"

With his expression still uncomprehending of what had happened, the knight flew back faster than he had charged, and crashed into the spear-wielding knight behind him.

The huge armoured man must have weighed over two hundred kilos all together, and the Spearman wasn't expecting to be hit by that out of nowhere.

"Pugh?"

Without even being able to scream, the second knight was squashed.

The third knight, the swordsman, had narrowly escaped it, but had been petrified with a disbelieving face.

"I-impossible, we three knights of the Azure Sky, our sure-kill battle formation..."

"...You lot know that if you're going to invade someone's castle, you should at least prepare? If you at the very least investigated what kind of magic I use, you wouldn't have chosen such a worthless option."

Zagan's fist was wrapped in a delicate magic circle. The mana, amplified by

the huge magic circles of the castle, was condensed into this circle.

The highly dense mana carried mass, so much so that it would even break the church's baptised armour. Zagan excelled at magic to protect himself far more than that to defeat his enemies. He could recover from even a fatal wound immediately, and he faced with an un-winnable situation, he could escape faster than human perception. That was how he had strengthened his physical abilities. Charging at him with a shield that was like a scrap of paper in comparison was nothing less than the height of folly.

Zagan waved his hand like he was warding off an insect.

"Go on, get lost if you understand that. Or are you going to have the slender girl back there carry three bunches of weight like you lot?"

The knights' faces were twisted into such an expression of hatred it seemed like it would kill a man.

"Not yet! I'm still here."

"Oi, stop, get back!"

"I will not get back, Lady Chastel, uoooooooooh!"

Taking his sword in both hands, the knight swung straight down from above his head. Zagan watched that with cold eyes and swung his left hand. With his hand covered in a magic circle, he had two fingers raised and used it like a sword.

The sword and Zagan's fingers collided. With a squealing, high pitched noise, the longsword broke in half. The knight opened his eyes so wide it seemed like they might pop out.

"Impossible..."

Then, Zagan softly extended his arm.

"W-what are you..."

He lightly flicked the bewildered knight's forehead. Like children often did as practical jokes.

"Goh?"

With a single finger flick, the knight hit the ground with the back of his head. Zagan mercilessly stomped on the fallen man's nose.

"Higgg..."

"Do you get it? If I put a little more strength into that, your head would have been crushed like a tomato. I'm sure if you hear your skull creak you'll never forget it. I'm afraid I've not forgotten it yet either."

It was when he was caught by that mage. It appeared that a sacrifice is better the more despair they held within them, and Zagan had a general knowledge of torture.

So he knew just how much this would make them fear.

As he spoke, he looked at the girl.

"Hey now, don't do anything rash. This guy's head will be crushed fruit before you draw your sword. You might be able to save him, but do you want something like that on your conscience?"

"H-helhp... igyah."

The knight let out a broken scream, and the girl removed her hand from the sword.

She's an understanding girl.

In reality, if she'd come at him with the sword, Zagan would have had some trouble. These three knights were no match for him, but the holy sword was different. It would probably cut right through the magic in Zagan's fist. Even in his own territory, it was doubtful if he'd win.

The girl glared sternly at him.

"Kuh... Why are you acting like it's a game, are you trying to make fun of the defeated?"

For some reason, the girl's eyes seemed disappointed as well as angry when she said that.

Zagan made a shocked face as if he didn't understand that.

"Do you know how to spread fear?"

“What...?”

Chastel’s face grew wary. Zagan needed to make them feel fear. To make them doubt that challenging him was worth it, whether they were safe, not just them, but he needed to make their superiors know it.

That was why he was going out of his way to play with them and not kill them. Him mercilessly stamping on the knight was to instil fear.

“Humans fear the unknown. But what spreads that fear is word of mouth. Even if I killed you all, the ones that sent you would only see that four people died. To spread that fear, you need to return alive and tell them. That’s what I’m doing.”

Putting more weight on his foot, the knight beneath it let out a cry like a crushed frog. He seemed fairly important in his own right, but seeing his face covered with mud, tears, drool, snot, and assorted bodily fluids was truly pitiful.

However, the girl said this.

“That’s a lie.”

“Oh...?”

Zagan opened one eye in amusement.

“There probably is a factor of self-preservation. Even the church has a side like you said. But those aren’t your true intentions.”

Zagan stiffened with a start.

Corpses on the grounds would scare Nephie...

So, he wanted to drive them off without killing them. The girl smiled with surety at seeing through him.

“...I was right.”

The girl placed a hand on her sword.

“Waid... I don’ wanna die...”

The knight at his feet begged for his life, but she didn’t take her hand from the hilt.

This is bad, she knows I don't want to kill.

A hostage had worth because they could be used as a shield. But if they knew you didn't want to kill, a hostage meant nothing as a shield. The girl finally drew the sword from her back.

"I am Chastel Lillqvist. By my master's orders, I shall subjugate the mage Zagan!"

With a holy sword against him, he couldn't go easy like he had on these knights. Even so, he didn't want to kill a girl close to Nephie's age. And killing a girl he had saved once gave a bad aftertaste.

At any rate, even against a difficult opponent, the girl — Chastel, wouldn't run away.

"Tch—"

Zagan kicked the knight under his foot away. The man rolled across the ground with the kick to his head, bumping into the other two that lay on the ground. As he did, Chastel had come into sword range of Zagan.

"Hah!"

The holy sword swung straight down. Zagan parried the flat of the blade with his fist, but—

"Oi, oi."

With that alone, cracks ran through the magic protecting his fist. He'd avoided the blade and parried it, but just touching it had done this. He dreaded to think what would happen if it cut him.

Chastel swung the sword up from the low position. Zagan couldn't do anything but retreat from the flowing series of attacks.

But it doesn't seem like there's that much strength behind them.

It was certainly sharp, but the sword itself was light. Even with the divine protection of the baptised armour, strengthening an originally weak girl had its limits. As she swung, Chastel yelled.

"Why!? Why won't you attack back? Are you saying I'm not a worthy

opponent!?”

That’s right, Zagan was only dodging, not attacking her himself. Zagan answered as he threw his body back to avoid a horizontal slash.

“Don’t be unreasonable, I don’t like hitting girls that much.”

Or rather, he’d gotten weak to doing so.

Girls around the same age as Nephie that is.

Rather than be hated by Nephie, if he made a fist, the lovely girl’s face flashed across his eyes. If it had been another girl but Nephie, he might be able to hit her easily.

So if he could solve it without hitting her, he tried to search for another method.

Chastel grit her teeth.

“Why is a person like you involved with magic?”

Rather than anger and hatred, it sounded more like a cry of lament. Zagan tilted his head.

“I don’t really know what you’re saying, but is using magic really all that bad?”

Even if he thought of himself as a villain, that had nothing to do with magic.

Chastel cried angrily.

“It’s evil! Because you have that power, you oppress people and make them suffer.”

“Then what about your power? You unilaterally kill mages weaker than you, right?”

“Ch.”

At that statement, Chastel’s face wavered, and her missed strike sent the blade into the floor. Immediately, Zagan stepped on it. Held by the flat of the blade as it was, even a holy knight would struggle to free it by force.

“Kuh...”

Zagan looked coolly at the groaning girl.

"I don't intend to justify myself, but there are many who could not live without magic. People that live off them by trampling them underfoot can't tout justice."

"Ah..."

Even as the girl tried to give a nice response, she knew it was true. She paled, and didn't reply.

Don't give that kind of response to that, it makes it harder to attack you...

If she'd yelled something unsightly, like her being in the right, he'd have easily been able to attack. Even so, she chewed her lip and put her strength behind the hand holding her sword.

"Even so... no, because of that, I won't lose!"

"Whoops."

The girl managed to pull the sword out by sheer strength. That ruined Zagan's balance as he was standing on it.

"There!"

Chastel lunged with all her might.

But, her sword's sloppy.

Zagan didn't dodge, and brought his hands together with a clap. Between them, he seized the tip of the sword. The protection of his magic circles was cracking. His palms felt like they would sear with the heat between them, but he still returned a fierce smile.

"Is a test of strength to your liking?"

"I'll take you on!"

Rather than retreat, Chastel put her entire body behind her sword.

The symbol engraved on the holy sword shone dazzlingly, and as if acting in concert, her baptised armour was also enveloped in light.

"What?"

It was hard to believe so suddenly, but the girl lifted the sword, and Zagan's

body.

She was hiding a trump card?

Just as Zagan was taking a wait-and-see approach, Chastel was hiding her true strength. And then, she continued on to swing the sword.

“That’s—?”

This dainty girl had swung a hunk of iron with a person clinging to it. It was hard to believe.

Even Zagan couldn’t bear that, and his hands left the sword. He was thrown into the trees behind him and the wind was knocked out of him.

She's stronger than me within my bounded fields?

Bounded fields weren’t particularly meaningful against holy knights, but Zagan hadn’t lost the power that strengthened him.

Though it may have been with a holy sword and baptised armour, the girl had overcome Zagan with pure strength.

He looked at where his hands had touched the blade.

They were red with burns. Even though he was healing them with magic, it was a slow process. This was probably an effect of the holy sword.

I should have killed her then.

He would have felt ashamed of killing an unresisting girl, but he should have been more wary of someone from the church. While he was groaning, Chastel cut forth towards him again.

He managed to stop the sword swinging down at him by the hilt, but the tree behind him was pulverised.

If it hadn’t been him, or if he hadn’t been within his bounded fields, he might have been pulverised along with it.

He let out a sigh. There was really nothing else for it.

I guess I'll have to kill her.

He could run. However, Nephie was in the castle, and if Zagan escaped,

Nephie would be attacked next, because the church judged those that allied with mages as ‘evil’ as well.

It seemed like even Zagan’s power didn’t match up with the holy sword. However, that didn’t mean he didn’t have other methods available to him.

It was as he gathered destructive power into his hands.

“Listen to me. Can you pretend to be killed by me?”

Zagan stared in wonder at those words coming from the mouth of a holy knight. Looking behind the girl, he saw the knights that he had laid out groaning and beginning to rise. Was it something she didn’t want them to hear?

“For what purpose?”

“The church won’t give up until you’re dead. If I lose, they’ll just send someone stronger. Pretend to die here, and give up magic, and live as a human.”

Zagan doubted his own ears.

“Not something I expected from a holy knight.”

“...You didn’t kill my subordinates. With making them fear, your eyes were kind of affectionate.”

They were words he struggled to accept immediately

I... was affectionate?

Zagan didn’t know that’s what his concern to Nephie was called. It wasn’t towards Chastel and the knights, but Chastel had seen through him that he was protecting her.

And then Chastel said this.

“And more importantly, I won’t forget that you saved me.”

So saying, she looked truly apologetic. *“...Sorry, there’s nothing else I can do.”*

She couldn’t pretend he hadn’t saved her. It wasn’t the first time he had fought with holy knights. However, it was the first time he had fought a holy knight he sympathised with more than mages.

It seems like she’s struggling...

If a holy knight were to protect a mage, it wouldn't just end with the revocation of their rank. They would be the shame of the church, deprived of even their human rights, tortured and executed so horrifically he would hesitate to put it into words. And for someone as beautiful as Chastel, it could go as far as the nightmare of sexual assault.

She didn't seem so slow as to not understand that. They weren't words she could say without real conviction. It got even harder to attack her.

However, I can't do that.

If he did as Chastel said, he could make good on his escape, and besides, there wasn't much left in the castle anyway. However, it would be impossible for Nephe to escape.

While Zagan was feigning his death, they'd investigate the castle and find Nephe. Because she still didn't hold her life in that high a regard.

He was lost for what to do.

"Master!"

It was Nephe's voice, who should have been in the castle.

Looking around, he saw her running towards them in her maid outfit. It seemed she'd come because he was too slow returning, or perhaps because she felt uneasy.

"Stay away, Nephe!"

"Eh, a girl...?"

Chastel let out a confused question. At that instant, they both showed an opening.

"Uooooh, don't mess with me!" Amongst the three knights, the Spearman rose, he had light injuries from being hit with the other knights. And then, his gaze fell on Nephe. "Tha mage's ally!?"

Zagan wasn't sure what the knight was thinking as he hefted his spear at Nephe as she ran to them.

"Stop it, Torres!"

Chastel called for him to stop, but the knight hurled his spear.

“Move!”

Zagan pushed her aside and ran in front of Nephe. However, if he flung her away with his current strength, it wouldn’t end well for Nephe, as delicate as she was. He took her gently in his arms, but the spear was upon them there.

“Tch—”

Zagan thrust out his left arm as a shield. With a squelch of torn flesh, the spearhead pierced through his hand.

“Master!”

Nephe cried out in sadness.

Even so, the spear stopped after piercing his hand.

“I’m okay. This is just a flesh wound.”

There was a light sheen of sweat on Zagan’s forehead as he said that.

With the holy sword inhibiting his healing, this wound meant his left arm was unusable for a while.

Blood dripped to the floor. It had been a long time since he’d seen his own blood.

Don’t get carried away, you shitty knights...

However, Zagan couldn’t give a voice to those abusive words.

Within his arms, he felt a shivering as if Nephe was cold.

“Don’t hurt my master.”

Zagan couldn’t immediately reconcile that voice with Nephe. It was a cold, dark voice that spilt from the normally lovely and languid girl.

Then, it happened.

“Hee, what?”

There was a phrase, ‘the forest stirs’.

It was a phrase for when the creatures living in a forest moved, or a strong

wind blew, making the trees shake.

No creatures ran from the trees, and there was no wind.

Yet still, the forest stirred.

Creatures gathered from the trees. There were infant squirrels, ferocious wolves and wild boars. They stared fixedly at the knights without making a sound. The trees themselves weren't shaking.

The foliage grew on its own, and thorny vines crawled out from the shrubbery, and stirred, as if the forest itself had a will.

And then, something that should perhaps be called the displeasure of the forest stared at the knights.

What on earth is this?

It wasn't magic. In the first place, Nephe was bound by the magic restraining collar. She shouldn't be able to use magic.

Having said that, it also wasn't the church's power.

If he had to put it into words—

Is she controlling the forest itself?

It was too different in qualities and scale from the magic that Zagan used. He felt a chill down his back.

The knights seemed to feel a similar thing. The spear-thrower began to shake at the completely unknown power.

"Uwa... U-uwaaaaah!"

The weaponless knight — Chastel had called him Torres — went to run.

"You won't escape."

Nephe stretched an arm out.



Vines crawled from beneath his feet, seizing his legs.

“Gya.”

From before the knight, thick tree roots advanced on him.

The trees pulsed like a living creature, swallowing up the knight's body and dragging him into the ground. They were wondrously strong, and in the blink of an eye, his baptised armour had fissured.

At the sound of his bones being crushed, Zagan finally came back to himself.

"Enough! That's enough, Nephie, stop."

As he held her tightly, Nephie stopped her hand in apparent surprise.

The knight that had been pulled into the ground was still barely breathing.

Is this, Nephie's power...?

It could be a characteristic of the elves, or because she was a variant with white hair. At any rate, it was a power Zagan didn't know, that surpassed even magic.

Chapter 4 — A Broken Heart is also Fairly Physically Painful

Chastel and her knights had retreated. The three were unable to fight, so he had repaired the bounded fields against intruders, and thrown them out. Chastel could deal with the rest.

“I’m sorry. I got someone unrelated involved with this.”

The girl had finally said that apologetically.

They then returned to the castle, and Nephe treated Zagan’s injuries. Zagan questioned the girl as she skillfully wound bandages around them, perhaps she was used to doing so?

“Nephe, I thought you couldn’t use magic?”

Nephe gave a shudder.

“It’s... not magic.”

“Then what is it?”

“It...”

Nephe’s face darkened severely. Her expression didn’t change particularly much, but her pointed ears drooped right to their tips. Zagan shrugged.

“Well, whatever. It doesn’t have anything to do with me what kind of power you may or may not have.”

Of course, he didn’t know if it was magic or what, but there was a maelstrom of thoughts whirling around his head, like if she had that power, why didn’t she resist when she was captured, why couldn’t she break the collar herself, hadn’t she thought of running away from him? But it wouldn’t change the fact that she was herself.

...Or that’s what he wanted to tell her.

Damn it! That sounded just like I was saying I didn’t care about her, didn’t it?!

“You’re Nephe. No one else. Whatever power you have.”

I managed to say it!

He had an impression that it was still in an oddly hard to understand way, but even so, Nephe opened her eyes wide in surprise.

“...Thank... you.”

Her drooping ears began to shiver. It seemed that he'd managed to ease her feelings... but it was questionable he had managed to convey what he wanted to.

While they were talking like that, she finished bandaging him. It hurt, but not so much as to immobilise him. There should be no obstacle to his daily life like this, and he should be able to stand fighting to a certain extent too.

Once the holy sword's power — though he didn't know if it was appropriate to call it that — had faded, they would be wounds that could be treated quickly, but Nephe's first aid was perfect.

“Hmm. Not bad. Well done.”

“...No, it's because... it was my fault.”

He'd thought he had managed to properly thank her this time, but she hung her head in shame.

Zagan really wanted someone to tell him some appropriate words for this kind of situation. He felt so seriously that he wondered about plucking Barbarus' tongue and transplanting it in place of his own. He worried so much that his brain was boiling, and wrung these words out.

“Ahh... Were you... scared?”

“You're... asking me that?”

She looked at him in further disbelief. He was groaning, thinking that he'd mistaken something again, when Nephe hesitantly opened her mouth.

“Master... don't you find me... ghastly?”

“Why?”

Recently, she'd been growing closer and closer to having something like an expression, and becoming even more fascinating. What was ghastly about that?

He shook his head seriously and Nephe repeatedly looked up at him and dropped her head again. Even so, she mustered her courage and murmured.

“Why...? Because... that was my power.”

“Yeah, it’s a type of power I’ve never seen. I’m interested in it.”

Perhaps that was why the Demon Lord Marchosias had wanted her. As he showed his agreement like that, Nephe spoke confusedly.

“Is that... it?”

“Hm? I’ve already said I won’t put you on the lab table, haven’t I?”

“I... know that... but that’s not what I...”

It seemed she’d finally believed him about that. He was honestly happy about that, but Nephe’s discomfort seemed to grow all the deeper. Finally seeming to accept she had to settle it.

“That power isn’t magic, it seems to be called ‘sorcery’.”

“Sorcery...?”

It was knowledge that Zagan had heard about. They weren’t techniques like magic that caused phenomena through the accumulation of logic and definitions, it interfered in all things through mere wishes, and it was said, that depending on the situation, it could even revive the dead.

Truly, miracles from gods that surpassed human knowledge.

Zagan had never thought that the day would come where he would witness it firsthand, and his eyes widened into circles.

“It actually exists? Can all elves use that power?”

However, Nephe shook her head.

“No. It is because... I am a cursed child.” That was the name that she had hesitated to give herself when they first met. Zagan waited motionlessly for her next words. “I have this power. But it seems this power is something you should not have. White-haired elves that have this power shouldn’t have been born, so...”

There was not a hint of emotion in her deep blue eyes. No hint of tears. They

were the eyes of someone that had been told they were not a person, not allowed to have even free will.

You've been through a lot, huh...?

Zagan didn't know what kind of words to say at a time like this. Nephie continued speaking, like an expressionless doll.

"Our village was attacked by humans... and I was ordered to use that power to protect the village, but..." She gulped, and confessed, even as she went completely pale. "They said it was to return the favour for allowing me to live until then, and I felt something snap." With a shaking voice, she continued. "I didn't resist at all, and was captured by the humans. That... was my revenge on the villagers."

He thought that was natural, who would protect those that had persecuted them? In fact, why had the ones that ordered her thought she would protect them? They were so naive that he pitied them.

"Everyone ran frantically. There weren't many that were caught like me, everyone was cut with swords, and burned with magic, I don't think there were any that escaped. Apparently, even elves' corpses are useful." Nephie's mouth curved into a smile.

"I saw that, and I thought 'serves you right'."

Her voice shook. "It's awful, isn't it? I saw everyone curse me and die, and I smiled from my heart. Laughed that it was their turn to suffer." When she got that far, it was like a thread had snapped, and her face returned to a blank mask. "Afterwards, I noticed what I had done. I realised I was someone that had watched someone die and smiled calmly."

Zagan let out a sigh of understanding.

So... is that why she never has an expression...?

She came to hate herself for smiling there, and came to deny even her own emotions.

He thought that alone was proof of her inherent goodness.

Having laid everything bare, Nephie sank to the floor in despondency.

“I’m sorry... you... hate me now, right?”

“Why?”

Nephie seemed like she didn’t believe her ears at Zagan’s utterly confused question.

“E-eh? No, but I...”

“That much is normal, right? I would have massacred the villagers. Of course, I’d have done the same to the invading humans. I think you’re truly compassionate, not doing that.”

It was probably perfectly likely for Zagan to do so. No, he’d actually do it. He’d even kill cute girls like Chastel if he had to. It would have been hard for him to find a reason to allow those that had made him suffer live. He’d have gladly killed them all.

And if they had hurt Nephie, he’d have thrown in the torture for free. Nephie seemed even more troubled.

“Is that... the case?”

“Yeah. You speaking so sharply to those knights earlier would have been much worse, right? If you can do that much, then while I don’t know how much power elves have, defeating someone after your head should be easy.” So saying, Zagan pointed a finger at Nephie. “But, Nephie, you seem to be working under a misunderstanding.”

“A-a misunderstanding?”

“That’s right. It looks like you think of your ‘sorcery’ as a bad thing, but power is neither good nor evil. Are there idiots who assign good and evil to blades? It’s just the people that take them up and wield them like that.”

Perhaps overwhelmed by the force, Nephie nodded over and over again.

But even so, her ears remained down.

“But... I think what I did... was unforgivable.”

“By who?”

“B-by the villagers...”

"They're dead, right? Then leave it be. I'm sure they don't have the willpower to complain after they're dead." Nephie's mouth dropped open. "Listen, Nephie. People can't just live a lovely life. If you have power, live strongly. To do otherwise is blasphemy to the weak that died."

Nephie held her chest, as if she was chewing over the words.

"It's okay... for me to have power?"

"Then I'll ask you, is it evil to have power? To want strength?"

"That..."

Zagan spoke kindly, like an affectionate father, to Nephie, who couldn't answer.

"Incidentally, I have been said to be evil."

At the far beyond excessive answer, Nephie stiffened.

"...Ehh?"

Zagan answered the surprised girl, seeming to be looking back on nostalgic memories.

"I forget who it was, but someone told me, someone that could do anything alone, that I couldn't understand their feelings. That the strong could not understand the weak's feelings."

He was sure it was an extremely pitiful girl that had been caught in one of Zagan's traps when running into his territory from bandits. That sight, beautiful in its own way, had been when Zagan had started to gather power as a mage. He had felt lonely, and thought that if he helped her, they might get along. Even so, he'd thought it was virtuous to save her. He had driven off the bandits and saved her from the trap, but these were the words she replied with.

"Are the weak not even allowed to live? Is displaying your power that great?"

He regretted it, thinking he shouldn't have saved her. Even as he set her free he felt sick.

Now that he thought of it, she could have lashed out in anger, he knew there was nothing to incite her hatred towards him.

Even so, Zagan had plenty of reason to be disappointed in other people. Pity and kindness were only a poison that corrupted people. It was because she had been bathed in that, that the girl had spoilt.

Saving people held no meaning other than personal satisfaction. The weak being trampled was only natural, they were worthless creatures.

There's no way I could understand their feelings.

"Of course, because I didn't want to become like that pathetic lot, I became strong."

The weak relied on others. Having someone to help was a dream. Someone who had been abandoned even by their parents would just be asking to be taken advantage of. So Zagan relentlessly sought strength.

Well, there's nothing at the end of that.

Being called superior sounded and felt good, but it was all in vain. Even so, he could believe himself. It was enough for him to simply live on. He snorted at himself.

And being like that, I'm so caught up when Nephie alone is saddened?

Even he found it amusing. Regardless, even if it was denying his life until now, he couldn't help but love the girl before him.

Even as he decried things like love, he was aware that he himself loved someone else from his heart. It was a first for him. This contradiction may one day destroy him, but even so, Zagan wanted to accept those feelings. So he frantically, clumsily, continued to speak.

"So, Nephie, don't worry about other people." He touched her pale cheek, doing his best to show the feelings he didn't know how to word. "So don't make that face. I said I needed you, didn't I?"

Her deep blue eyes shuddered, and her thin fingers returned the grip on Zagan's hand.

"I can... be here?"

"Of course you can. You made such delicious food, I already can't imagine a life without you."

Even as he wondered if he should bring up food there, his thoughts were soon far from there.

Tears ran along Nephie's cheeks.

"N-Nephie?"

"U-uu... ue..." Zagan let out her name in confusion, and she pressed herself to his chest. "Uwaaaaaaaaahhh."

And then raised her voice into cries.

Zagan didn't say a word, just stroked her head until she stopped crying.

Before long, she regained her calm, and bowed her head while she messed with her pure-white apron.

"...Um, I showed... such an embarrassing side to me."

"I don't mind. It's the first time I've seen you talk so much."

As he said that in payback for the day, the tips of Nephie's ears reddened.

"Master, you're mean."

And then, her gaze fell to his hand. His hand that was even now stroking her.

"Master, does your hand... hurt?"

"Hm? Ah, it does, now you mention it."

At some point, he'd stopped feeling the pain. It wasn't that he had lost the sensation in it, so why?

As he tilted his head, Nephie took that hand.

"Excuse me, master."

She said, then began unwinding the bandages that she had applied. And then, for some reason, though there were traces of blood, the wound where the spearhead had passed completely through his hand, was nowhere to be seen.

Even Zagan was surprised at that.

"Did you do that, Nephie?"

"I don't know... But, probably."

Her lack of confidence was no doubt because she herself had done it unconsciously. In the first place, after being persecuted by her own race, she'd probably never wished to heal another's wounds.

"That's a surprise." It seemed that sorcery surpassed even the mana from a holy sword. "This is amazing."

"Is that... so..."

"Yeah, thanks, Nephie."

He honestly gave his thanks, and Nephie's eyes widened in shock.

"What's up?"

"That's... the first time you've said those words... to me, master."

At those words, Zagan held his head.

I haven't even said 'thanks' to her until now?

Even though Nephie had been looking after him and preparing his food.

"...Ahh, I'm uh, sorry."

Zagan said, and her ears shook in apparent happiness.

"It's because I am yours, master."

He was sure that any happiness he heard in her voice at that was his imagination.

The feelings of emptiness that had once spread within him, where now nowhere to be found.



Night was a time that had until now been dedicated to research, but had recently been used to sleep. Nephie had a regular lifestyle so had grown used to it as he matched it.

It was just as he put an elbow on his throne and surrendered himself to sleep that there came a knock at the door.

"Nephie, huh? What is it, at this time of night?"

Nephie was normally already asleep by now. Maybe she was thirsty, but this

was the first time she had come all the way down to the throne-room from the spire.

She entered, and her white sleepwear let him guess that she had already been to bed once. She looked so lovely that he might lose his mind, carrying a fluffy pillow in both arms.



Still holding that pillow, she timidly opened her mouth.

"Um, master..."

At her fairly formal manner, Zagan straightened himself.

Finally, Nephie spoke decisively.

"Can we... sleep together?"

It wasn't just her ears, but her entire face that went red when she said that. Zagan's face stiffened too.

I'm a man, and Nephie is a woman, so sleeping together means...!

Zagan swallowed his saliva with a gulp. Even he was a man, after all, there were several times when he thought of ravishing the soft skin of such a beautiful girl. However, if he let himself go in the moment and hurt Nephie, he wouldn't be able to recover. So he had controlled himself.

Then Nephie had come to entrust her body to him!?

Taking into account that he might have heard wrong, or she may have said it wrongly, he calmed himself and asked back.

"Nephie, do you know the meaning behind what you're saying?"

"...I do."

She was probably nervous too. Then, with tears gathering in her eyes, she spoke.

"It's because there is only one bed in this castle."

As he felt like shouting in joy, Zagan tilted his head.

Hm? But isn't that a weird way of putting it?

Certainly, the only bed in this castle would be in the room Nephie was using. All the others were so worn out and dirty they wouldn't work as bedding, and Nephie had worked to tidy them all away.

Of course, he had no qualms about bringing their bodies together in her room, but he had a feeling that that might not be what she was talking about. After thinking it over for several seconds, he understood that it was not a problem he could solve on his own, and asked back, as if he had been outlasted.

"A-and so...?"

Nephie seemed to have noticed she hadn't said enough as well, and after a short silence of embarrassment, spoke once more.

"You're always sleeping while sitting, master."

"Well, yeah."

"I thought... lying down, might be easier on you."

But even if he lay down, there was only Nephie's bed.

So it's... that? Wanting me to be easier on my body?

At Zagan's still uncomprehending face, Nephie said.

"So, if you would... sleep together..."

Her face was so red it seemed like she might burst into flames. Zagan thought he might have a similar expression.

She's too pure...

So she wasn't saying that she wanted to have sex, she was purely saying that she wanted to sleep together. That was a slow death in itself though...

He had been encouraged this much, so was torn between the desire to push her down anyway, and to keep her pure. At the end of his deliberations, the answer he derived was.

"Nephie, I'm grateful for the consideration, but this is the focal point of the bounded fields. Being able to move quickly when there are intruders is convenient."

It felt like he would cry blood. However, that was the truth.

And the holy knights just came today.

He wouldn't have normally been so fussy, but he couldn't let his guard down now. It was easy to let your guard slip after an attack, and there was a distinct possibility that a second squad would aim for that. So he had to stay in this room, to be able to react quickly if something happened. However, Nephie nodded as if she had predicted that answer.

"I thought... that might be the case, so..."

Nephie sat atop the carpet, and spread her arms.

“Please, use my lap.”

A... lap pillow?

He couldn’t have predicted this. And from the fact that she’d even brought a pillow with her, she intended to do so for the whole night. He was so happy he thought he might die.

Nephie waved her arms to Zagan, who couldn’t decide immediately. It was like she was saying that it was embarrassing to say twice, and to hurry up.

There’s no way I could refuse that invitation...!

He wanted to look at her like that for a little longer, but he soon broke down and stood from the throne.

“R-right, then, thank you.”

Haltingly, he lay on the floor, and entrusted his head to Nephie’s lap.

It was carpet, walked on with shoes, but thanks to Nephie cleaning it, it was softer than a blanket. The warmth between her soft thighs, rather than arousal, made him feel strangely at peace. Nephie stared steadily at him.

“How... is it?”

“I-it’s not bad.”

Looking up from beneath, about half of Nephie’s face was hidden behind her surprisingly large chest. He was amazingly lost on where to look.

Nephie stiffly stroked his head. It was embarrassing, but nice, and his gaze wandered all the more.

Attempting to feign calm, Zagan cleared his throat.

“But what brought this up all of a sudden?”

Nephie looked away once, troubled, and then murmured.

“Even though you know about my sorcery... you said I could stay here, master. So, I wanted to thank you...”

It was the first time she had put that into words. Knowing that it had made

her that happy, somehow made Zagan happy as well. Still lying down, he reached a hand out to her cheek.

"You're always doing so well, but I've never said it again."

"...Right."

Nephie nodded shyly.

He remembered something he had forgotten to ask her. He hadn't been able to because of the holy knights coming.

"Hey, Nephie?"

"Yes?"

Zagan said this to the blankly nodding girl.

"Do you want to try learning magic?"

Nephie blinked twice in puzzlement.

"Me... learn magic?"

"Yeah, you've got the sense for it. Besides, you couldn't control the 'sorcery' well earlier, could you?"

Sealed by the collar, she couldn't use magic now. However, she had manifested 'sorcery' even with the collar.

If he'd not interfered, Nephie would have torn the knight apart. Treating Zagan's wounds was the same. If she didn't learn to use it more consciously, she herself might end up hurt.

"It's a different power. And you won't necessarily be able to control the 'sorcery' because you learnt magic, you should be able to protect yourself."

Even if it would take a little while, Zagan hadn't given up on removing her collar. Nephie's eyes shook, as if she couldn't hide her confusion.

"W-will I be able to...?"

"You will, I'm sure you'll be an even stronger mage than me."

Elves were ordinarily strong in magic. And with Nephie's sense, she might even make it to the throne of a Demon Lord.

Nephie held her chest tightly.

"Will I be able to be helpful to you, master?"

"You've already been plenty of help."

Not just looking after his general needs. Just in showing more and more of her emotions, being able to talk to her every day. He truly felt that she had given him something irreplaceable.

"Will I be able to be like you, master?"

"Ahh... with power? I'd like you to be even stronger if you can."

He wanted to teach her magic, but he didn't want her to become a villain like him. He wanted to see lots more of her expressions, but Zagan wanted Nephie to stay as she was.

"Will I be able... to protect you too, master?"

"You already have, from the holy knights, right?"

He felt a little pathetic, being protected by a girl, but he was honestly glad for those feelings.

Nephie's ears vibrated.

"I'll do it. For you, master, I'll try to learn magic."

I'd have liked for you to say it was for you, but...

Even so, it was another step closer to a desire for something for her. So Zagan smiled in praise.

"Then, Nephie, you're now my student."

"I am."

Her expression now looked happy.

My student, huh...

He hadn't actually thought of it until he had said it. That he would be sharing his knowledge and power. But even so, he thought he'd give it to Nephie with no strings attached.

They both remained silent for a while. And then, Nephie suddenly spoke up in

a comforting tone of voice.

“Um, master.”

“What?”

“About this evening...” That would probably be when she cared for him after driving the knights off. “You said that you were a person that could do anything alone, and you didn’t understand weak people’s feelings.”

“Yeah, I did.”

That was one of the things he’d talked about with Nephie, after she had open-heartedly shared her secrets with him. It was a boring memory, but he’d needed to tell her to not worry about other people’s thoughts and words. Nephie lovingly stroked his head.

“You said it like it was nothing, but it was really hard, wasn’t it?”

Zagan’s eyes opened wide.

“Why... do you think so?”

Nephie’s snow-white hair swayed as she shook her head.

“I don’t know, but...” she clutched at her chest as if it was her own pain, “you looked... very sad then, master.”

Nephie curled up, as though to hug Zagan. The soft swell lay on his face, and he went red.

“O-oi...”

Without paying mind to his agitation, Nephie said this.

“You aren’t evil, master. You may not say a lot, but I will never forget your kindness.”

Even unconsciously, he felt like those words may make him cry. With a shaking voice, he could only return with.

“...I see.”

But even so, Nephie’s ears trembled in happiness.

“That’s right.”

He could feel her heartbeat from where her chest rested on him. Whether she was nervous or ashamed, or feeling something else entirely, it was a fast beat. He felt as if all of the stress up until now had been released, and he slumped.

“Nephie.”

“Yes?”

He'd called out to her, but couldn't think of a single thing to say. He just wanted to call her name.

“This kind of thing... isn't bad at all.”

“...It's not.”

Nephie nodded like always. He was sure that if he asked for her body, she wouldn't refuse him. But her lap was too comfortable, and before he knew it, Zagan had fallen asleep.

It had been a long time since he had slept and felt this at ease.



“Oi, oi, oi, oi. I heard you were attacked by holy knights, but you're not hurt at all?”

It was the next day, in the throne-room. It was Barbarus that would say that, while destroying someone's bounded fields and invading.

It had been about a week, but he was always like this. Zagan waved a hand in irritation. Honestly, he was never there when he wanted help the most, and him turning up now was just him getting in the way.

“Who cares, maybe it's 'cause they were just weak?”

“Weak', I heard they even sent a holy sword wielder?”

“A holy sword? Ah yeah, there was one of those.”

That was Chastel, honestly, with Nephie's 'sorcery' afterwards had completely thrown that from his memories. And though she was a holy knight, she didn't seem to be hostile. If she'd wielded the holy sword seriously, she would have probably been able to fight on equal footing with Zagan. So he hadn't really

acknowledged her as an enemy.

“Huh, even the Maiden of The Holy Sword isn’t a match for you!?”

“Nah, she was strong in her own way, you know? She broke a lot of the fields on the castle.”

Zagan still hadn’t finished restoring them, so he’d rather fix them than talk to this man.

As they were talking about this, Nephie arrived carrying a tray of tea and snacks. She placed the tray, prepared at some point, on the table, and gave a courteous bow.

“Please, add milk and sugar to your liking.”

Seeing Nephie say that and stand behind Zagan, Barbarus’ mouth dropped open.

“O-oi, that’s the elf from before, isn’t it? It is, right?”

“Yeah, this is the same girl as before.”

“You still haven’t sacrificed her? Or is it that? In exchange for sparing her life, she’s to serve you? Nice, that’s a good pastime.”

Nephie clung to Zagan’s sleeve in fear at Barbarus’ unbelievable fantasies.

“Don’t lump me together with you. Nephie is, you know... my uh, student.”

Barbarus’ face twitched, and then cried out as if being faced with an unreasonable reality.

“Huuuh? Your student? You said student, right? So by student, you mean? That you’ll teach her your magic? You did?”

“Got a problem with that?”

Zagan pushed back his partner in crime with distaste, as he’d approached so close that his spit flecked onto Zagan’s face. However, it was hard to say that he’d fallen for her and bought her. So after worrying for a while, he gave that as an excuse.

“There’s magic you can’t use alone. I’m sure Nephie will be useful.”

It was again speaking of her like a tool, but it was the best he could do to praise her.

Even with magic, there are things you can't get alone.

He thought what Nephie had given him was one of those things. She was probably used to his roundabout manner, and gave a refined curtsy.

"I give my thanks."

Barbarus slapped a hand to his forehead in apparent bewilderment.

"Damn, I see... Together with an elf, there's not much magic you can't use. I hadn't thought of using her like that." At Nephie being spoken of like a tool, Zagan knew his face had grown harsh. It was similar to what he had said, but allowing other people to say that was another matter. Barbarus made a sudden expression of understanding. "Could it be, that was the power that defeated those holy knights?"

"Well, it was certainly Nephie's power."

Nephie had certainly defeated one of the holy knights, it probably wasn't inaccurate to say he had borrowed her power.

Barbarus muttered with a thoughtful expression.

"Then, that's what that destruction by the entrance is?" That's right, he hadn't fixed the remnants of Nephie controlling the forest. By his expression, Barbarus had seen those traces. It was certainly destruction of a different quality than magic. Taking Zagan's expression as an affirmative, Barbarus let out a groan. "Are you seriously aiming for the Demon Lord's throne?"

Hearing that phrase, Zagan remembered. Both he, and Barbarus had been chosen as candidates to be Demon Lords. His head was honestly occupied with Nephie, so he hadn't remembered that for the past few days. Because, Zagan was aiming for something other than a position.

Even without the throne of a Demon Lord, if only I could get 'that'.

It wasn't that he had been so focused on Nephie that he had lost his interest in the Demon Lords. If anything, Zagan was the mage that most adhered to the Demon Lords. To put it correctly, he needed a 'certain thing' that Demon Lords

had. Even so, he thought.

If I was a Demon Lord, would mages that would lay their hands on Nephie disappear?

Nephie had become his student, if Zagan were to become a Demon Lord, she would be a Demon Lord's student, and not only that, she would become much closer to being the next Demon Lord. No matter how confident a mage was in their abilities, there weren't any idiots that would pick a fight with someone like this. So, Zagan gave a ferocious smile in return.

"Is there a reason not to?"

Honestly, he didn't think he would be chosen at his level. It wasn't humility or self-abasement, it was that it would be hard for an eighteen-year-old to defeat other mages that lived for hundreds of years. Zagan had only started along the path of mages a mere decade ago, other mages had spent centuries on that path. With the accumulation of knowledge and experience over time, there was no way to win, no matter how much he struggled.

Even so, if I lived, I could aim to be the next Demon Lord.

The passing of the mantle didn't happen much for Demon Lords, but if he lived for centuries, he was sure the next would come.

Zagan took a cup of tea in his hand, he savoured the refreshing scent, and then brought it to his mouth. He didn't know the brand, but it had an elegant flavour, and went well with the snacks.

"Hmm, a good flavour."

"I am delighted to hear so, master."

Barbarus watched that exchange in surprise.

"Zagan, I hesitate to think it, but have you got feelings for her?"

"It's nothing strange to treasure your student, is it?"

Saying that, he thought that the word student was convenient. His worries about how to disguise his falling for her had been solved with a single word. Barbarus raised his voice in laughter.

"Kaka, I see, so that's how it is... So you've still got a human-like side to you."

"Bugger off." Barbarus downed his tea in a single gulp and stood. "What, already leaving?"

"Yeah, 'cause I ain't leaving the Demon Lord's throne to you. And there's been an unforeseen harvest."

Ignoring Zagan's questioning look, Barbarus really left.

"What'd he come here for...?"

He let out a disgusting sigh, as Nephe asked questioningly.

"Is he not your friend?"

"Don't mess with me, friends just bring disadvantages unless you choose them well."

"But, master, you looked like you were enjoying yourself."

"I did?"

"Yes."

He didn't want to admit it, but Nephe nodded with surety.

Speaking with that guy is 'fun'?

He thought it was trivial, that Nephe was mistaken. And yet, for some reason, there was a part of him that couldn't deny it. Just because Zagan himself might have been unaware of it, it wasn't like that made him unfortunate by any means.

Washing down the feelings he didn't want to accept with tea, Zagan stood from his throne.

"Well then, let's start fixing the bounded fields the holy knights destroyed. You can come too, Nephe. We'll be starting from the basics of the magic circles."

"Right, master."

If he called, he was answered. Time spent with another, was surprisingly sweet.



It had been half a month since Zagan had bought Nephie. She had diligently studied the basics of magic, and if the collar had been removed, she had come to a point where she could use a fair amount.

On the ‘sorcery’ front, it was still hard for her to control. And it seemed like it was not an omnipotent power, it had a lot of restrictions. The road for her to improve that still seemed to be long.

Even so, their life together seemed fulfilling, and at that point, Zagan received a summons from the Demon Lords.

Now then, what on Earth do they want with me?

And at the appointed place, twelve silhouettes awaited him. They had all hidden their faces, and taken positions in shadow around him, so he couldn’t confirm their faces. However, there probably wasn’t any meaning in concealing themselves like that. The difference in the order of magnitude of mana he could feel from them showed their identities itself.

Oi, oi.

He knew that there was sweat on his forehead. Their gaze alone gave an intimidating air that penetrated right to his bones. The atmosphere itself seemed to have thickened into a slurry from the clinging menace. Simply standing there made his stomach churn. Were they really the same living things as him?

It wasn’t the unrest of a frog being stared at by a snake, it was the feeling of a frog already in the snake’s stomach.

The twelve current Demon Lords were gathered in this place.

They were the pinnacle of mages. Would a mage become one of their number, or would they wither and decay without reaching that pinnacle, there were no other destinations for mages.

Finally, one solemnly opened their mouth.

“So thou art Zagan.” And from there, a woman’s voice resounded.

“I hadst heard of his youth, yet he is practically a child.”

Another voice continued.

“Intriguing, the record for the youngest.”

The Demon Lords gazed at Zagan and raised their voices in amusement. It didn’t feel good, being made a show of. They were people to respect, but Zagan had no time to go along with the pastimes of the elderly.

If I don’t hurry home, I won’t make it back for Nephie’s dinner.

And while he was here, Nephie was waiting alone. Though the bounded fields had been repaired, a holy knight with a holy sword class weapon or a mage of the same calibre as Barbarus. On top of Nephie’s sorcery being unstable, he couldn’t afford to leave the castle for long.

So Zagan brusquely declared.

“Did you summon me here to observe a specimen? If you’re satisfied, I’d quite like to return home.”

While it was a complaint that might have his superiors kill him, the Demon Lords, in fact, murmured with pleasure.

“Fufu, how boorish of us.”

“It is simply the first time we have met a mage such as ye. Allow us our triflings of curiosity.”

“And my, how bold, to speak to us so sharply in this place.”

They all laughed in unison, and finally, a silhouette that seemed to be a leader.

“I shalt speak frankly.”

It was an old, cunning voice, and simply hearing it made Zagan think he had been seized. Resisting his cold sweat, Zagan gazed at the silhouette from the front. And then, it proclaimed this.

“Mage Zagan. We have called ye to accept ye as the thirteenth of our group of sworn friends — as a Demon Lord.”

Zagan stiffened at those all-too-sudden words.

Did I hear wrong? To make me a Demon Lord?

Before rejoicing, he first doubted, thinking he may be being deceived. Before he opened his mouth, a huge crest, made of light, rose from behind the Demon Lords. No, it wasn't light. It was mana. The crest was spun of mana, of an unusually high density and amount. Simply witnessing it made his knees feel weak, it was a mass of overwhelming power. And, he could feel that same power from the twelve here. The lead silhouette spoke.

"It is the Carved Seal of the Demon Lord entrusted to Marchosias. To inherit the title of Demon Lord, is the process of inheriting this crest."

He let out a gulp.

Being a Demon Lord isn't just a title?

Inheriting the crest — this power, that would mean that Mages had no way to stand against Demon Lord. The reason mages must obey the Demon Lords was not just a matter of their relationship as superior and subordinate.

Showing him this was, at any rate, something that showed it was no joke they would make him a Demon Lord. Noticing this, his throat went bone dry. Hoarsely, Zagan asked in return.

"You will make me, a Demon Lord?"

"Dost ye disagree?"

"That's not what I'm saying, I am just baffled. There are mages with more power than I, aren't there?"

Even Barbarus would be one of them. Mages at the auction he had bought Nephie at had lived longer than him, they should have accumulated vast knowledge and power. And in the first place, Zagan didn't even have a title.

"A natural question, Zagan. Thy power indeed is weak."

"Enough so that we may extinguish it with but a breath."

However, the silhouettes continued.

"Regardless, there is not a mage that may kill ye."

He mentally clicked his tongue.

So they even saw right through my power.

Zagan's magic was a power as the silhouettes said.

"The first mage killed by ye was Andras, with the name of Resentment."

That was the name of the mage that had kidnapped Zagan to sacrifice.

"He had not the level of power that is now thine, but he was not a weak mage."

"Even on the slimmest chance, he was not so powerless as to fall to an eight-year-old babe."

"And yet, he was killed by ye, and all of his wisdom was now thine."

It was a record of treason, yet the Demon Lords extolled it as a great exploit.

"In thine life to that point, ye had not the opportunity to come into contact with magic."

"The magic seen by ye was only the single instance, thrown by Andras at ye."

"And how did ye slaughter that mage, a holder of a title?"

Lovingly, one of the silhouettes spoke.

"Ye learnt that magic, seen only once."

Another silhouette continued in admiration.

"Through that single instance, ye even understood the structure of magic."

"So through that instance, ye created a unique magic."

Zagan had only one piece of magic that was unique to him. Neither something stolen from Andras, or learnt in the past. A magic only Zagan could use. It was that first magic that he learnt that brought down Andras.

"An awe-inspiring magic, and—"

"A detestable ability."

The twelve silhouettes murmured, as if in praise.

"That which if ye chose to plunder, none may stop ye."

"That which if ye chose to kill, none would survive."

"If ye desired power, all mages would have to offer all to ye."

"If ye were to give a single order, all mages would have to obey without question."

"Truly, a tyrant's power, fit for a Demon Lord."

They were unanimously praising him, but in those voices was a confidence that he wouldn't match up to them. And then they continued, thrusting that before him.

"It is paradoxical, yet ye are diminutive."

"Yet ye are possessed of a terrifyingly strong ability."

"There is a possibility with thine ability."

"Ye will someday become the strongest mage in history."

"Therefore, we shall dare to make ye, weak as ye are, a Demon Lord."

"It is all for the heightening of intelligence."

"It is all for the advancement of magic."

Their song-like chorus ceased. He realised that he had been taken in by the atmosphere around the silhouettes. Zagan glared back at them to shake that off.

"If those words were true, then I would be able to steal from even you here."

Of course, Zagan wasn't so foolish as to challenge them to fight here. However, he asked to find out what kind of existences they were.

"Aye, yet, take care."

"There may be more to lose, than to gain from taking from us."

Zagan felt like he had taken a blow.

If they know that much, they know about Nephie.

He could resist the power they held. They wouldn't settle it with a simple hostage. Even if it had been before he had met Nephie, the result wouldn't change. They would destroy absolutely everything. Zagan might not be able to be killed by even a Demon Lord, but simply not being killable by them did not mean he could defeat them. Each time he gained something, they would take

and destroy it. And eventually, he would be ruined.

It was there that Zagan realised.

I involved Nephie in that kind of thing?

Now, the leader silhouette spoke.

"I would hear thy response."

"...Before that, there's something I want. My answer depends on gaining that."

"Ha ha, a deep greed. Speak it."

Zagan spoke of what he wanted. The silhouettes nodded in amusement.

"Very well. The legacy of Marchosias is thine to do with as ye will."

"You said that fairly simply."

"We have said, have we not? That should ye decide to take, none may stop ye."

His objective was almost anti-climatically made his.

Zagan nodded.

"Then I humbly accept the position of Demon Lord."

Then, the leader silhouette spoke.

"Then let us welcome our new sworn friend."

Unexpectedly, they then applauded Zagan. Even though it didn't feel like he was talking with people, it was a surprisingly human reaction. Which, on the contrary, made him all the more uneasy. It was like monsters beyond humanity were mimicking humans. He noticed this, and his clenched fists were drenched in sweat.

Even so, somewhat free of the overwhelming pressure, Zagan regained his calm enough to ask unrelated questions.

"There's something I want to ask you. Do you know of a man that skins people and uses that in magic?"

One amongst them soon opened their mouth.

"Most likely that is the Face Skinner. He is a worthless mage, we had heard that ye hadst already dealt with him?"

It seemed that he was not mistaken as to that mage.

"Was he a skilled mage? Strong enough to break another mage's bounded fields in their territory."

"Impossible. He was superlative as a spy, yet his skills with bounded fields did not leave that of a child's."

At that answer, Zagan's mood grew all the more gloomy.

In other words, he had an ally.

And when limited to those that could break Zagan's bounded fields, that 'ally's' true identity was soon clear. He had thoroughly learnt that mages were a hard type of person to save.

The silhouette tilted its head.

"He should not have been a man to have taken thy interest though?"

"Yeah, exactly right. I asked something worthless, forget about it."

And then, another silhouette nodded in though.

"Our memories have lapsed."

"On what?"

"Ye have no title. This shall not do."

"Yeah, now that you mention it, I don't."

It would be unheard of for Zagan to be given the name of Demon Lord.

"Then, shall we decide on thy title?"

"Let us. Though it seems Marchosias already has."

And thus, Zagan unexpectedly gained the position of Demon Lord.



"Welcome home, master."

He returned to the castle, and Nephie greeted him. As usual, her expression

barely changed, but her ears shivered. A reaction that all but said that she had been anxiously awaiting his return.

"I have prepared dinner, lamb stew for tonight."

"Y-yeah."

At Nephie's gentle greeting, he was suddenly filled with feelings of guilt.

Nephie... hasn't been corrupted yet.

Even with the elves' village, she simply didn't do anything, she didn't kill anyone. Even when she had attacked the holy knights, Zagan had stopped her in the end.

However, Zagan was different. He remembered that he was different.

The strange Demon Lords. They were what mages aimed for. The destination of all mages. Zagan was the same as them, he had already become the same. Then being with him made Nephie's destination the same.

Beneath the dark and dirt, with not a glimmer of light.

She might still be able to be pushed back.

It was too late for Zagan, but Nephie still had a future in the light.

"Master? Did something happen?"

As he lowered his head, Nephie looked up worriedly at him. Her ears that had been pointed into the air earlier now drooped, and Zagan knew that someone else sympathised with him from the bottom of their heart.

Was it right to drag such a gallant girl into that darkness?

The unrefined collar was still around her neck, a symbol that she was Zagan's property.

If only she didn't have this, Nephie would be free.

Without the collar, people should accept her without prejudice. Kianoides would be good. The people of that town had been kind, even to the mage Zagan and Nephie with her collar. And it was close enough that Zagan could protect her if something happened.

She was bewildered at first, but she had opened her heart when given warmth, enough to trust even Zagan.

Zagan took a key from his pocket.

"Nephie, I have become a Demon Lord."

"A... Demon Lord?"

"A king of mages, one that other mages follow, the pinnacle of mages."

The girl's eyes suddenly widened, and she put her hands together and nodded.

"Congratulations, master."

Her expression didn't change, but he could feel her congratulating him from her heart. It was for precisely that reason that his chest ached unbearably. With thoughts that felt like they would tear him apart, he continued.

"With the inheritance of the title of Demon Lord, I also obtained my predecessor, Marchosias' legacy. The mage that captured you, Nephie." The key that Zagan now had in his hand too was part of Marchosias' legacy. The thing that Zagan had demanded from the twelve Demon Lords. "Nephie, don't move."

He said, and inserted the key into the girl's collar. With a slight clank, the metal collar fell apart.

"Eh...?" With a disbelieving face, Nephie gazed at the ruins of the collar that had fallen to the floor. "M-master, this..."

Zagan nodded at Nephie as she began to break into a smile.

"Yeah. As a Demon Lord, I no longer need you. Get out."

Zagan coldly announced to the girl he loved more than anyone.

It was the moment the clumsy pair's life together came to an abrupt end.

Chapter 5 — Becoming a Demon Lord Seems to Require Outrageous Behaviour

When she became aware, Nephie was crouched in front of a deserted, dilapidated house, in a corner of the town.

Why... am I in this place...?

She couldn't think well, as if her mind was shrouded in fog. She recognised her surroundings, this was Kianoides. The town where she had first met Zagan, and a place they had often visited to buy food and other things. She didn't know how she had come to be here at all. What was she doing here in the first place? She remembered preparing dinner, but had Zagan eaten that?

She had made the same stew that she had first made for him, that had made his eyes, as unsociable as he normally was, light up in joy. She had wanted to see him rejoice like that again.

She had to get back to him quickly.

When she thought that, she noticed what she was clutching, a fragment of a broken collar. Around her neck, was no longer any collar.

Ahh, that's right, I...

"Was discarded by my master."

Putting it into words, her thoughts were suddenly shattered. Her heart felt like it was stopping. Even if that wasn't the case, Nephie may have already lost her mind.

Even though he said... to stay by his side...

It was the first time.

The first time that Nephie had been treated like a person, been spoken to. The first time she had been given a room and clothes, given a reason to live.

Zagan was the only one that had told her he needed her. Nephie had thought that she might be able to find a place to belong.

And yet...

She held her knees and buried her face there.

"At times like this, you cry, right...?"

Being thrown away by Zagan didn't feel real. Perhaps because of that, the feeling of sadness didn't come forth. She thought that maybe if she closed her eyes and slept like that, she might be back at the castle when she awakened.

And yet despite this, that wasn't the case at all, in some corner of her head, she understood this was real. And yet her emotions would not work. It was then.

"Is that you...? Mage Zagan's servant from back then?"

She heard an unfamiliar voice. When she raised her head, there was a girl standing there, clad in knight's armour, with a large sword on her back. Even if she didn't recognise her voice, she felt she recognised her appearance, and surveyed her for a while, before finally remembering where she had seen it.

"One of those that fought master...?"

She was one of those knights. Come to think of it, this girl was the only one to withdraw with no wounds.

"Listen, Nephie. Stay away from holy knights."

At some point, that was something Zagan had said to Nephie. They were the enemies of mages, professional killers that would judge all involved with mages as criminals. He was warning her to be careful, as they may aim for Nephie.

Zagan, who had said that, was no longer at her side. She didn't understand in the slightest why it had turned out like this.

"So I will be killed."

Nephie murmured, as if she had given up on everything. This girl had most likely seen Nephie's 'sorcery', and people that decided even a mage with a heart like Zagan were evil, would not think to allow Nephie, who controlled sorcery, to live.

She no longer had a collar. With the magic Zagan had taught her, and her

sorcery, she might be able to fight the girl before her, but she couldn't even see any meaning in doing so.

There's no meaning in living, without my master.

She didn't think she would mind dying here... yet, the girl shook her head in a panic.

"W-wait! Don't misunderstand, I don't intend any harm on you at all."

"...A holy knight kills mages do they not? I am master's servant, and his student. Go ahead, decapitate me or do whatever you wish."

"Q-quit talking like I'm some demon that kills people!"

"You're not?"

"I'm not!"

For some reason, it was the girl that was moved to tears and denying this. Perhaps because that argument had started, they had drawn a crowd.

"Oi, what's the ruckus. That's Nephie-chan over there, ain't it?"

"That's a holy knight. They gotta have their eye on her 'cause she's a servant at the mage's place."

"Should someone help her? Nephie-chan seems weak-hearted at the best of times."

The onlookers were talking among themselves, but for some reason, it seemed to be the girl that was being criticised.

"I-I already said I wasn't, didn't I?"

The girl shrank away, her voice shaking. And then, someone who hadn't been visible dashed out of the crowd.

"Hah! Nephie-chan, are you okay?"

Dashing forwards as if to protect Nephie, was a familiar winged woman.

"Manuela...san."

The store assistant that had picked out Nephie's clothes in the clothes store, and even afterwards occasionally recommended her new clothes when they

saw each other in town. The pyjamas she wore in the castle were picked out by her too.

When she saw Nephie's face, Manuela was aghast.

"W-what happened? Did she do something to you? Are you injured? Where's your master?"

"Nothing... at all. I'm not wounded... either."

"That's obviously not nothing!" Her voice grew harsh, and the winged woman glared harshly at the other girl. "Oi, you! You're a holy knight of the church, don't you have any shame? Tormenting a weak and kind-hearted girl like this!"

"That's right!"

"Go back to the church!"

"We'll give ya less tithe!"

A storm of criticism arose from the crowd.

"T-that's not..."

"What's not!?"

"Yer standing there so calmly after makin' Nephie-chan look like that!"

"That ain't something people do!"

The girl rapidly paled and shrank to the floor under the angry roar that was essentially that of a mob. The commotion was getting larger on its own, but the holy knight girl hadn't really done anything to Nephie. A soft voice of mediation came forth.

"Umm... please wait, everyone."

"It's okay, Nephie-chan, we'll protect you."

Nephie returned a dead-eyed gaze to Manuela's resolute smile, and spoke.

"...No... this person, hasn't done anything to me..."

Suddenly, the area fell silent.

"Eh, but..."

"I said I wasn't..." It seemed the knight girl had already burst into tears, seeing her tears and snot was a sorry sight. "Hich, I just... ech, saw a girl that looked hurt, guh, and was worried..."

It seemed that she really had just called out to Nephie because she looked like something awful had happened. Thinking that it might have been her fault she was driven away, she felt somewhat apologetic.

"Ehh..." Manuela had a bluntly troubled face. "Then why was Nephie-chan making that face? It didn't look like something little."

"I..."

"Ueeeeeeeen!"

Lost for an answer, the holy knight gave no acknowledgement of her disgraceful behaviour, and burst into tears. Nephie stood, and bowed her head.

"I apologise for causing a nuisance... I also apologise for that knight. Well then, I shall take-

As she went to stand, Manuela frantically stopped her.

"There's no way we could just leave you be like this, is there?"

"But..."

Nephie's gaze found the crying holy knight. If she couldn't leave someone alone, Nephie would have expected it to be the knight. Manuela was lost for words too, but with a cry of exasperation, patted her red hair.

"Both of you come with me!"

And thus, the strange trio of a mage's student, a holy knight, and a shop assistant hurriedly left the area.



"...I'm sorry for showing such unsightly behaviour."

The holy knight had finally stopped crying, and spoke with a still-red nose. Looking at her once again, she seemed to be about the same age as Nephie. The three had entered a bar, but there was an unavoidable gloom about them. Even though the bar wasn't that large, the customers moved towards the walls.

Nephie felt like she would have liked to have mingled with them, and become a decoration on the wall, but she was part of the cause.

Even if the holy knight had once hurt Zagan, because Manuela had gone to protect Nephie, she was involved in this. Nephie wasn't so lacking in feelings to leave abandon her and escape.

Though that said, she had no idea what kind of expression she should have now, so she could only remain there, silent and expressionless.

Manuela spoke with a forcibly bright voice.

"There's a lot of my acquaintances here, so, for now, you're safe. There're rooms upstairs too..."

It seemed that she had inferred from Nephie's current state and Zagan's absence that she wouldn't be returning home today. Gradually, Nephie, brought to the bar by Manuela, shook her head.

"I don't currently... have any money."

She had really come out with only the clothes on her back. She only had a note of the recipe for that night's dinner in her pocket, and had nothing else with her. Seeing that scrap of paper, Manuela's expression clouded too.

"Ah geez, tonight is my treat, so just sit down! You haven't eaten yet, have you?"

She had no intention of replying, but the holy knight's stomach let out a grumble from where she was standing next to Nephie. Manuela turned cold eyes on her.

"..."

"I-I'm sorry!"

Nephie, a mage's student, and the girl, a holy knight were enemies... or so they should have been, yet for some reason, Nephie couldn't feel an ounce of hostility from the unreliable girl. Manuela had Nephie sit, and then started ordering this and that... though the majority seemed to be alcohol. As they waited for their food, the holy knight opened her mouth.

"That's right, I haven't given you my name yet, I'm Chastel. As you can see, I

work as a holy knight.”

“...I’m Manuela. You’re paying for your own, alright?”

“Why are you so cold to me!”

“Well, I don’t know if you *really* didn’t torment Nephe, do I?”

She had attacked the castle, the holy knight’s — Chastel’s body stiffened suddenly.

“Ugh... That-”

“See! You did do something, didn’t you?”

“B-but, that was my duty, so...”

“Huh? So you can harm people if it’s your duty?”

At any rate, it seemed that the town didn’t think well of holy knights. Then again, Kianoides was a mage’s territory, so that would have an influence on the inhabitants’ thinking. Nephe spoke to Chastel, who once again seemed on the verge of tears.

“No, it’s okay. You didn’t end up doing anything then.”

“Really?”

“Wounding master was a separate matter, and you made up for that.”

Perhaps remembering that ‘sorcery’, Chastel began to shiver.

“Then, what did she do?”

“I don’t really know. But she helped the others in their wish to retreat.”

“Ahh, like a bag carrier?”

“Yes.”

“That’s not it!” Chastel exclaimed, hitting the table. “I’m the Maiden of the Holy Sword, you know? So one of only twelve captains of the holy knights? What’s with that phrasing!?”

“But, did I say anything incorrect?”

“You... uuhh.”

Chastel once again seemed to have been talked down.

Is she... faint of heart...?

As they talked like this, a bowl of soup was finally placed before Nepheie.

“Um... I can’t accept this.”

“You’re going to sit there and not eat, even though I’m drinking? Then not even I will be able to enjoy getting drunk.”

“Hahh...”

She didn’t really get the logic, but Nepheie nodded her head, overwhelmed.

Why is she being so kind to me...?

She took the spoon in her hand, and put the collar fragment she had been carrying so carefully onto the table.

“Your collar broke?”

“No... master removed it.”

Chastel looked steadily at Nepheie’s face.

“You don’t seem awfully happy for th-ow!”

“...Read the mood a little, would you.”

Manuela had apparently kicked her. Her legs should have been protected by the armour, but it seemed to have been an attack aimed at a gap in that armour, and Chastel teared up.



Lost for a reply, Nephie gripped the spoon.

“...Thank you for the food.”

“Sure.”

When she brought the spoon to her mouth, it was a somewhat nostalgic flavour. No, not nostalgic, it was the same flavour as the soup she had made for that night.

Lamb soup.

Something hot ran along her cheek.

“Huh...?”

It was a tear. She hadn’t been feeling even sadness, yet when the warm soup entered her mouth, she couldn’t stop the welling tears. Chastel nervously cried out.

“A-are you okay? Did I say something I shouldn’t have again?”

“Eh, euuuuuuuuu.”

She couldn’t bear it, and let loose a sob.

Why, why... master...?

Manuela embraced Nephie in her large wings, as though she understood everything.

“Ahh, geez... you two can cry on your big sister as much as you need.”

“T-that’s not why *I’m* crying, you know?”

The world might be a kinder place than Nephie thought.

After a spell of tears, Nephie haltingly spoke of what had happened at the castle. Manuela listened silently, with a tankard of ale in one hand, and by the time Nephie had finished, there were five empty tankards lined up beside her. Chastel listened with her face showing her suspense. Even though she was a holy knight, she might not be a bad person.

Once she was done, Manuela roughly put her tankard on the table, with a flushed face.

“And then, he drove you out without you understanding why?”

Nephie gave a small nod.

"Perhaps I failed at something?"

It was too sudden, she couldn't think of anything. Chastel nodded in resentment.

"And I thought he was worthy of note, what a guy. It's like he just used you."

"Master isn't that kind of person."

Chastel faltered at that instant reply.

"I-I know that much, but that's exactly why I don't get..."

"Do you know anything of master?"

"Hee, you don't need to be that angry..."

"I'm not angry."

She was tired from crying, and Nephie was normally expressionless. Chastel shuddered. Manuela got between them and calmed things down.

"Now now, it's because you spoke ill of her beloved master."

"I didn't speak ill of him!"

Nephie looked at the two arguing, and Manuela returned the gaze.

"Then, what will you do from now, Nephie?"

"What... shall I do...?"

It was unavoidable, she was lost there. Chastel cleared her throat.

"Why don't we holy knights protect you? Protecting victims of mages is also one of our duties."

"Huh? If she goes with you, she'll obviously be under the Inquisition, right? Do you really just want to torment Nephie?"

"I don't! But she was just a servant, if we call her a victim, even the church would have to protect her..."

"And if she weren't she'd be sent to trial. We can't send her somewhere it would all be over if she were discovered, can we?"

"Then what do we do...?"

Nephie shook her head at Chastel, who had pursed her lips.

"I appreciate your feelings, but that would paint master as a villain. I cannot do that."

Chastel's shoulders dropped, and then, reluctantly, opened her mouth.

"There's... something I'd like to ask you. Do you think the mage known as Zagan has ever been accompanied by several other mages, and performed kidnappings or sacrificial rituals?"

"I don't think he has." It was perhaps prejudice against mages, but Nephie could reply immediately. That kind of person, even if they held feelings towards Nephie, would have repeated the same thing. They wouldn't have wanted her to have a personality. "Master cannot help but hold an uncanny amount of concern towards the weak. Even when he saved a carriage from bandits, he said he couldn't stand the bandits."

Though she thought that might have just been to put her at ease. When Nephie had paled, he had attacked the bandits.

"Those kind of people are trash."

He had said that, and not sought recompense from anyone, or even praise from Nephie. Chastel gave a nod as she groaned.

"So I was right..."

"Right, about what?"

"Ah, I just thought it was just like you said. Even when we crossed swords, he went easy on me because I'm a woman. It's shameful, but, um, how do I put it...?"

Manuela, who had just emptied another tankard, leered at Chastel as she started to mumble.

"My, my? What's that face, miss holy knight? A maiden in loooove?"

"W-wha- Don't be so rude!"

Chastel yelled, and then her shoulders drooped. And then, she murmured.

"The first time I met him... he looked like he needed help."

At those words, Nephie's heart pounded.

"Sometimes, master looks awfully lonely."

It was particularly when he spoke of the path that he would have such an expression. She didn't know where else Zagan and Chastel had met, but she felt a slight jealousy that someone other than her knew those expressions of his, but at the same time, she was a little glad.

I'm sure... the master I knew, wasn't a lie.

The night they had met, she had been able to once more see the moon, that she thought she would never see again, and had been unable to bear it, and reached her hand towards it. Next to her, Zagan had gazed at the moon with her.

"I didn't catch anything." He had murmured, troubled.

That couldn't have been fake. And then, she thought this.

Does master not need help even now...?

His face when he told her to leave was more heartbroken than Nephie.

She put her hand to her chest.

Perhaps it was because Manuela and Chastel had listened to her, but she had been able to regain her calm enough to remember Zagan properly. Was the master she knew someone who would abandon her just because of his whims or because she had fulfilled her purpose?

Absolutely... not.

There must have been some kind of circumstances around it. Thinking like that, she remembered Zagan saying a word that was on his mind.

"Umm, what kind of thing is a 'Demon Lord', do you know?"

Even when she was explaining the particulars of what had happened, Nephie had forgotten to say that phrase. Manuela and Chastel looked at each other.

"They're the best among mages, aren't they? The Demon Lord Marchosias was this town's boss, but the public order was good, and he didn't really seem that scary, you know?" And she then continued, *"Apparently, that Demon Lord*

died recently, and then there's been some awful things happening."

"...The kidnappings by mages?"

"Yeah, that. Though it seems the culprit was subjugated by the church."

Manuela nodded at Chastel's question. Nephie hadn't heard the specifics, but even she had heard the rumours. It sounded like it had been the holy knights that had solved that incident, and hearing that, Nephie tilted her head.

"The townspeople don't seem to think so kindly of you for that..."

"Uuhh, that..."

"And then afterwards they asked for a crazy amount of money for it. 'Course we can't honestly thank them for that."

"They levied it, even though it's a donation?"

"Tha-I don't get it."

Chastel slumped in sadness at the steady glare.

"Um, they didn't directly collect it, did they? Then I don't think blaming her will help."

Chastel once more looked at Nephie through tears.

"You're so kind, I can understand why he had you by his side."

"You... can?"

It was the first time something like that had been said to Nephie, and she blinked blankly. Then, Chastel shook her head.

"We're drifting off the point. Demon Lords are things the church speak of as symbols of evil, that must be defeated. There are thirteen Demon Lords and only twelve holy swords, even if all of us clashed, we would be one short."

The church's greatest enemies — it seemed that Zagan had become that kind of existence.

"Would becoming a Demon Lord mean you had to fight with the church?"

"I guess so. Currently, with one of the Demon Lords dead, the church... it's not like I personally think this you know? Anyway, the church's fervour towards

defeating mages has increased.” At Manuela’s glare, Chastel hurriedly rephrased herself. “If a new Demon Lord were born, the church would judge that it was a good opportunity to defeat them. I couldn’t even imagine just how terrifying a mage they could become if not taken down. Or there might even be mages after their position.”

Zagan had said that he had become one of those Demon Lords.

It would... develop into a conflict?

That was probably why he had tried to keep Nephie away. She gazed at the palm of her hand. In the past week, Zagan had taught her the basics of magic. So that she would have magic to protect herself, and to one day be able to control her ‘sorcery’.

But that was wrong.

I wanted to be of use to master, and I learnt magic.

Even if she returned, she might be nothing more than a hindrance. But even so—

Nephie stood.

“I’m... returning to master.”

“A-are you sure? Weren’t you sent away?”

Nephie shook her head at Manuela and Chastel’s expressions of surprise.

“Master is strong, I’m sure he’s already strong enough he wouldn’t lose to anyone. But that doesn’t mean he can’t be hurt.”

“That the strong could not understand the weak’s feelings.”

It was a phrase Zagan had said frankly. He certainly hadn’t said he was hurt. But even so, he had looked awfully sad. Just that wouldn’t lead him to despair about people, even so, she wondered if that had been when he gave up on connecting with people. Seeing him like that, Nephie had wanted to embrace him

“I may not be able to help master. But I’m sure he won’t always remain unhurt.” So, Nephie spoke.

"I want to be master's support."

It might be conceited, she might be sent away again, even if she returned. But regardless, Nephe thought that she, who had wanted embrace Zagan then, would be accepted by him.

That's why, I want to be by his side like that.

It may have only been half a month, but she wanted to trust in the memories she had with Zagan. No man was an island, and even Nephe was the same.

Chastel smiled.

"I see. Then, I'll do what I can too."

"Do you... intend to challenge master once more?"

"That's not it!" Shouted Chastel, as her face went bright red. "That's not it... I can't plead his case, but I think I can erase the stain on his honour."

"On his honour...?"

Chastel nodded at Nephe's questioning.

"It seems a mage used Zagan's name and committed crimes."

Nephe didn't know that that was the one who committed the kidnappings.

Chastel then spoke secretively.

"It might have been to frame him, so I'll try and capture those mages."

"Aren't holy knights and mages opposed?"

"Well, they are, but..." Chastel murmured uncomfortably, "Isn't not being able to repay your life being saved twice awful?"

It seemed that she was considerate in her own way.

Manuela was gazing at them with a smile.

"Now then, seeing as you two are back on your feet, let's call it a night. Ah, the bill's on this knight if you would!"

"Wha-I didn't even order anything!"

Seeing Chastel's disturbance, put Nephe at ease for some reason.

What is this feeling?

Manuela wrapped an arm around a confused Nephie.

“Well, if anything ever happens again, come to me. I’ll even listen to your grumbling. Though I’ll have you dress up in the store’s products,ahaha.”

Nephie blankly tilted her head.

“Manuela-san, why are you so kind to me?”

It was a different feeling than Zagan’s kindness. Manuela’s eyes widened as if she didn’t understand it either.

“Well, we’re friends aren’t we?”

“Fr..iends...”

“Eh, we’re not?”

“...I don’t know... no one has said anything like that to me before.”

Zagan’s relationship with the mage that had visited him — Barbarus she thought his name was — suddenly came to mind. Zagan bad-mouthing him, but it was with an odd easy, and she was honestly slightly jealous. Surely, that was the kind of relationship friends had.

Manuela was taken aback for an instant, but soon smiled.

“Then I’m your first friend, right? Let’s get on!”

“U-um... right.”

“Uwah, you’re bright red, are you okay?”

Then, Chastel timidly raised a hand.

“Um, can you think of me like that too?”

“Like what?”

“Uuhhhh, can you think of me like a friend!?”

“Eehhh? You’re a holy knight, right? Can you be friends with a mage?”

“But!”

Manuela covered a tearful Chastel with her prized wings and began stroking

through the knight's red hair as if there was no helping it.

"If we weren't friends, I couldn't tease you like this, could I?"

"...Teasing is friendship?"

Even though she seemed awfully dissatisfied, Chastel let out a sigh of relief.

They then left the bar and went to split up.

"Lady Chastel!"

A rough voice came from across the street. Looking in that direction, three men dressed in holy knight's armour were running towards them. Nephie remembered their somewhat uneven shapes, and narrowed her eyes.

"Hee, Y-you're from back then!"

The lanky man amongst them shot up, perhaps feeling the glare. And then, Nephie remembered.

"The one that injured master then...?"

"Eh, what? They hurt your master too? So they're members of the church..."

"Why do you view the church as so hostile!?"

The knights readied their weapons and Chastel forced her way in between them to arbitrate. And then.

"Heeheehee, friendship is such a wonderful thing."

An unpleasant voice came from right behind them. And then immediately, a marsh-like darkness spread out beneath their feet.

"Ehh-"

Without the time to realise what was happening, Nephie was swallowed up to her waist by the darkness.

"Nephie-Hiah?"

Chastel was stopped by the black, mud-like substance as well. It pinned her arms, and she was dragged into the darkness, not even able to draw her sword.

"Lady Chastel!"

The knights ran, but they would never make it in time. And even so, Chastel was a knight.

“Ru...n... Manuela.” Even as she was being swallowed by the mud, she pushed Manuela, the furthest from it, away. The winged woman spread her wings and escaped into the sky. Even so, a tendril of the mud-like thing followed her as she frantically rose to escape. “Kuh, protect the townspeople!”

Finally, the approaching knights mowed down the tendril with their blades.

“Tch, one escaped. Well, whatever — I am known as Zagan! If you wish to save these people, come to my castle.”

The owner of the darkness said in a voice which both resembled and did not resemble Zagan’s. Nephie had heard that voice before.

“Why... would you...”

A familiar face floated in the darkness.



It was several hours later. The moon floated in the sky above the ruined castle. Zagan was looking up at the night sky at the castle’s entrance.

The night he had first met Nephie, she had stretched her arms towards the moon. He had wondered what the meaning behind it was, and now, there was no way to find out. Zagan once again reached out to the moon, but of course, couldn’t catch anything.

No, maybe I caught it back then.

The girl that had first stolen his heart, was beside him then.

“To think this was such a quiet place alone.”

It was *too* quiet, so much that his ears hurt. Nephie wasn’t a girl that spoke a lot, but the sounds of her bustling about doing the cleaning, or preparing dinner had certainly livened the place up. Zagan was standing stock still, in that deserted forest. From underfoot, a groan resounded.

“Guoh, impossible... We three Knights of the Azure Sky, even together, couldn’t even scratch...”

The three idiots... no, the three knights, that had intruded a while ago had come to attack, seething with anger for some reason, so, for now, he'd gone to face them.

Did they already hear about me becoming a Demon Lord?

He felt it was too quick, but it didn't matter anymore. Nephe wasn't here. He'd never forget her face when he told her to get out.

It was hurt.

Of course it was, solitude was painful. It hurt as much as Nephe telling Zagan that she hated him would. Even though they were opening their hearts, and showing their feelings. Being thrust away by someone that was accepting you like that was much worse than any wound.

But I'm sure the townspeople will do good by her.

He knew that the townspeople of Kianoides had happily accepted her when she went shopping. They should even distract the church. In the first place, they had only been connected for a mere half a month. Once the heat died down, there shouldn't be anyone that would look for the connection.

Unrelated to mages and the church, she should be able to live in a peaceful warmth.

That was fine. Everything worked out. Everything had returned to how it was before they met. And then, Zagan went to return to the castle.

“Wait...”

One of the knights on the floor, their baptised armour broken, their famed longsword smashed, reached out and grabbed Zagan's leg. He let out a tired sigh.

“I'm in a bad mood right now. Do you think I'll go easy on you like I did before.”

The reason they were on the floor and still alive was that they had been defeated by traps that Zagan had already made, when he was going easy on intruders.

That's right, Nephe made this trap.

As one of their experiments to control her ‘sorcery’, they had used it to create a sorcery that would be enacted when a fixed condition was met. These knights were more or less powerful enough to intrude up to the castle itself, because they had been brought down this easily, they could probably call this experiment a success. Though he now had no way to tell Nephe that. As Zagan went to kick his hand off, the knight pleaded in a voice that made him seem to be about to cough up blood.

“It doesn’t matter what happens to us! But, at least... at least save Lady Chastel.”

“Chastel...?”

That was a point, that holy sword wielder was nowhere to be seen. He’d thought that these knights had ran ahead, but...

“She... searched for the true culprit of those kidnappings, so much so that she fought with the Cardinal that you were not the culprit. If you are not, then you shouldn’t be able to overlook that, right?”

“...I don’t quite follow?” He knew that he had been made out to be the perpetrator of the kidnappings in Kianoides, and most likely this culprit too. But he didn’t think it was likely the knights would just say so on a mere assumption.
“Has she been kidnapped?”

“Don’t play dumb! You were the one that swallowed lady Chastel in shadow and said to come here, weren’t you!?”

He was right on the mark, they had attacked thinking that he had kidnapped Chastel. They had been taken in by some kind of deception, but Zagan had fought with Chastel, and gone easy on her, then now wanted to fight on even footing. That was an awfully credible line of thought.

Or perhaps he had wanted to provoke these guys?

If he had killed Chastel then, after killing a holy knight captain, the church would have put all the more effort into his subjugation. Even if he’d let her live and leave, kidnapping her like this did hold a basis. That attack itself might have been devised for exactly that reasoning.

“It’s awfully well prepared in that case.”

And then he thought.

I see, she was kidnapped.

The holy knights were trying to risk themselves to help her. It seemed that they had a lot of worries, and he couldn't actually hate them.

“Give back lady Chast-”

He didn't even feel like pointlessly criticising them. Letting someone die might leave a bad aftertaste, but when he was asked for help, he wanted to help, that was the contradictory personality that Zagan had. He might not be evil, but he certainly wasn't good either. It was just as he was worrying what to do.

“Mr maaaage!”

A voice came from the sky. With the holy knights having invaded this far, the bounded fields up to this point were meaningless.

“What is it this time?”

He asked, as he took a step back. Immediately, a woman fell from the sky.

“Pugh?”

The woman had landed on the holy knight's head. Zagan frowned as he saw her.

“You're...?”

The woman that fell from the sky was a winged woman with golden hair. He remembered her, the saleswoman from when they bought Nephie's clothes. The knight that had been landed on cursed.

“Damn you, bird woman, why are you interfering!?”

“We said he wasn't the one to blame, didn't we?”

“What are you saying! You came here too did you not!?”

“It was to look for help! Yet you're attacking him!?”

Zagan let out a sigh at the woman and knights who seemed to be having some kind of argument.

This is annoying, I guess I'll just kick them out.

As Zagan went to use a magic circle, the woman clung to him.

"Mr mage, help. They... Nephie and Chastel were kidnapped!"

"What?"

He didn't know why Nephie's name had come up there, but Zagan groaned. The knights on the floor had spoken of a kidnapping, that the spate of them in Kianoides hadn't ended. Nephie had probably been caught up in that.

No, that's not it.

If Zagan was right about the culprit, this was to provoke him. She had been targeted because she was his attendant and student.

So keeping her at a distance made me too slow?

As he groaned, Manuela shook his shoulders.

"Please, you can save them, right?"

"B-but..."

If Zagan were to publicly help her, then she would definitely be known as one of his followers. She would be completely thought of as one of his allies, and be unable to escape from the church. Of course, he had no intention to abandon her, but he had to find some way to hide his involvement. He couldn't just race off now.

Manuela shouted at his conflict.

"What are you worrying about! She'll come back to you no matter what you do, right!?"

"Wha...t?"

Manuela pleaded tearfully to a wide-eyed Zagan.

"I heard you sent her away, even so, she said she wanted to be with you, to support you, so no matter how many times you push her away, she'll come back."

Manuela clutched at his chest.

"You mages don't feel nothing when you're seen like that, do you? If you did,

“why were you kind to her!?”

She beat at his chest. She wasn’t a holy knight, nor a mage, just a normal woman. And yet, it hurt, it hurt more than any attack he’d taken until now.

Nephie tried to return. To me, even though I said such awful things to her...

He didn’t wonder why. He had watched over her for this half a month. He knew full well why she had done so, even without seeing her emotive ears. She had feelings for him. For Zagan, as villainous as he was. If she was to have feelings for someone, he’d have wanted them to be a more upright person. He was already past the point of no return. Zagan heaved a deep sigh.

“...You’re right, you’re completely right.” Zagan laughed. “Mages are complete scum, they only think of themselves, and think of others as mere tools, and take the life from all around them as they please.”

“W-what are you...”

“How on earth did I come to sympathise with others when I’m like that?”

It may have been a momentary delusion, but it was a completely foolish thought.

That’s right, mages only need to think to their own benefit.

There was no need to have such painful thoughts. They could just do as they pleased. Just as he had done, unhesitatingly, before he met her. Just as he had gotten rid of the torture implements and bandits because she was afraid. Just like he had protected her before thinking from that spear from the holy knight. Zagan spoke to the bewildered, winged woman.

“I give you my thanks. My mind is clear now.”

What he should do was obvious from the start, so Zagan stepped forward.

“Nephie is mine. Any moron that lays a hand on her must be slaughtered.”

His hands would be stained, but he knew magicians were a corrupt existence. Even if all the authority and mana of the Demon Lords was brought to bear, he just needed to protect Nephie from all of it.

And yet I was seized with fear.

He had lost his vigour, when faced with the twelve Demon Lords, overwhelmingly above him. So he'd capitulated, and hurt Nephe.

Can I still undo it?

He didn't know. But there was only one thing he needed to do now. He then remembered the dumbfounded knights.

I guess I'll save Chastel while I'm at it.

If she was taken with Nephe, he'd come across her anyway. As his foot hit the floor, a huge magic circle spread out from it. The transfer magic circle that he had used to remove Chastel from his territory at some point. This time, it was connected to a certain mage's base.

The culprit is obvious.

Then, he looked to the winged woman.

"You were angry for Nephe, why?"

"Well, because we're friends, obviously..."

Manuela answered timidly, and Zagan offered a hand to her.

"Then, will you come with me? To save Nephe."

"...I'll come."

At his feet, the knights groaned out.

"W-wait, take us..."

They were already so beaten they couldn't stand, but the knights clung to Zagan's legs as they spoke.

"...Yeah, I get it. I'll take you, so get your filthy hands off me."

And thus, the strange combination of a mage, holy knights, and a saleswoman disappeared into the magic circle.



"Nephe, are you hurt?"

When she awakened, she was in a gloomy cell. It had probably been remodelled from a cave or something, all of the walls were made of rock, and

there was pointed stone hanging from the ceiling, stalactites. Judging by the lack of stalagmites on the floor, the floor had been flattened. There were no bars, but in their place, chains hung from the walls.

Looking towards the light, the cavern was huge. It was a magic circle that was giving off the light, but it was unusually large. Nepheie could only see a part of it from her location, but she thought it might be even larger than one of the halls in Zagan's castle.

A chain clinked, Nepheie once more had a collar around her neck, and her limbs were shackled, she knew that they each had the power to suppress magic as well. Chastel was bound next to her, but she had been stripped of her sword and armour. She looked so normal in her skirt and shirt that you wouldn't believe she was a holy knight. The pair's chains were connected to the wall, and even if they pulled with all their might, didn't seem like they would come away.

Before, Nepheie would have probably given up on everything again, she'd have been killed either way after all. But it was different now.

I decided... I would return to master.

She had to escape from here. However, with the collar and shackles, she couldn't use magic, and 'sorcery' was not enough. Sorcery was not the limitless power that mages thought of it as.

After a bought of squirming, Nepheie looked around her.

"Where...?"

"I don't know, but I think it's the hideout of the one that captured us."

Then, footsteps approached. Chastel stood as if to protect Nepheie, but she was chained to the wall too, so just showed her defencelessness. The face that appeared, was of course, one that Nepheie knew.

"Weren't you master's friend, Barbarus-sama?"

It was the mage that had visited as Zagan's friend. She couldn't say they had a good relationship, but they seemed close. A smile appeared on his thin face.

"Friends! My, what a surprise. I didn't think there was anyone that thought that kind of thing when they saw mages." Laughing, Barbarus gripped her

cheek. “One of the mages he killed was Andras of Resentment. He was the first mage that Zagan killed. I was his student.” Nephie’s eyes opened wide. “Oh, don’t get me wrong. Getting revenge for their teacher isn’t what mages do. Even if Zagan hadn’t killed him, I would have eventually.” There was no resentment of deceit in his words, it was probably his true feelings, not a bluff. “But that castle he lords over, the money he used to buy you, and even that knowledge should have been mine. There’s no way I could live with him cheating his way to it, is there?”

Now, he looked at Chastel.

“I tried to stir up the church first, but it didn’t go too well. My subordinates were too easily tracked, and the lot I sent against Zagan were easily repelled. I’d hoped that with a holy sword, you could have at least taken one of his arms.”

Nephie understood. It was soon after the attack that Barbarus had visited, and he was curious about Zagan’s wounds. Without Nephie’s ‘sorcery’, he probably would have been stuck fighting him single-handed. Chastel glared fiercely at him.

“Are you the one behind the kidnappings!?”

“What, you only just realised?”

She remembered Zagan stating that the kidnapping was ‘like they were showing it to the church’.

Could master already know who is behind it?

He hadn’t given a name, but he had a rather defeated expression when he was talking about it.

Chastel yelled in a shaking voice.

“You did such a horrific thing just to frame Zagan!?”

“Of course not?” Barbarus smiled unpleasantly. “It was Face Skinner that brought up sacrifices, but we had to demonstrate a big ritual.”

“Demonstrate... to who?”

“Isn’t that obvious? The twelve Demon Lords!” Barbarus spread his arms wide. “I’ll show them that I am worthy of becoming the next Demon Lord, and

the only way to do so, is to defeat the other candidates.”

Then, he approached Nephie’s face.

“Honestly, I was worried about how to get the sacrifices, but then I got you. With a white-haired elf, I can open the ‘Door’.”

Nephie gazed back at him, expressionless.

“I apologise, but that is most likely pointless.”

“Heeh, you don’t say? Do you think I won’t kill you? Or possibly, do you think Zagan will come to save you?”

“Zagan will come to save you?”

At those words, her chest ached.

Would... master come for me?

In the first place, Zagan didn’t know that she had been captured even, and for some reason, he was distancing himself from her. From the bottom of her heart, she felt that he wouldn’t just abandon her, that kind of person wouldn’t look so pained. Even so, there might be a reason he wouldn’t save her. Nephie shook her head.

That’s not it.

She once more thought she was weak.

I wanted to help master, yet I’m just pulling him down.

She wouldn’t be able to return to him if she couldn’t do something about this level of a problem. With her expression still unchanging, she looked at Barbarus.

“No, I have no intention to cause problems for master with this. That’s not what I’m saying.”

“Ohh, then what?”

“It’s pointless because master inherited that position of Demon Lord.”

The expression slipped from Barbarus’ face.

“...You’re lying.”

"It is the truth. That is why I was dismissed."

Barbarus staggered back.

"Impossible. Him, a Demon Lord!?" He scratched his hand through his hair.
"He wasn't content with just stealing Andras' legacy from me, but the Demon
Lord's throne as well!?"



Then, he looked at Nephie with a somewhat ill gaze.

A shiver wracked her body and she was yanked by the collar around her neck.

“Agh...”

Her hands and feet were shackled, so Nephe sprawled onto the ground without even being able to brace herself.

“Come!” Barbarus was heading towards the wide open space. “He’s a Demon Lord? That’s just fine, I’ll just take it by brute force. If I can complete this, it won’t matter if he’s a Demon Lord or not.”

There was an ominous magic circle drawn out there. The huge circle that she could even see when bound to the wall. There was a gigantic symbol engraved in the centre, surrounded by dozens of layers of ‘circuits’ drawn in minuscule symbols. Nephe knew that the entire circle was drawn in blood. Just how many sacrifices had been needed to draw out such a complex magic circle?

She knew that she was to be the ‘finishing touch’.

Chastel shouted angrily.

“S-stop it! Use me as the sacrifice, I have that much resolve as a knight!”

Barbarus gave a suspicious looking glare.

“Even if you didn’t demand it, I’ll find something else to use you for, so don’t you worry. This ritual needs the best tools.”

Nephe ground her teeth.

“*Tool.*”

That was exactly it. That was what Nephe had been called for her entire life.

But master never once called me a tool.

She hadn’t repayed that yet. So she couldn’t die without meaning here.

I want to live.

For the first time, Nephe wished for that for herself.

“...I will live... and return... to my master.”

She might be turned away, she might be scolded. But even so, she would stubbornly stay in the castle. She would make breakfast in the morning, and wait patiently until Zagan ate it. If she cooking all three meals wasn’t enough,

she'd give him another lap pillow. She'd do everything to make Zagan happy.

If it's a test of endurance, I won't lose, even to master.

She had withstood days of persecution, like a corpse. Compared to back then, when there wasn't even a hint of warmth, she'd withstand being in the warmth of Zagan.

Nephie might night be necessary, the day might come where he had someone other than Nephie that he treasured.

But you won't be alone, master.

Solitude killed the heart, took all feelings, and made the world seem like ash. That couldn't be called living. The one who had given colour to the world again for Nephie, who was just surviving, was none other than Zagan. So she wanted to be at his side, supporting him, until the day came that his solitude was gone. She twisted and resisted.

"...Let... me go."

"Tch, you little!"

Barbarus pulled irritatedly on the chain, and she fell once more. She was pulled along the ground, and blood spilt from her arms and legs. She welled up with tears of pain, but Nephie grit her teeth and glared at Barbarus.

This isn't even slightly painful.

It was nothing compared to being told to get out by Zagan. Compared to his sad expression then, it didn't even hurt.

So Nephie yelled.

"I am my master's, I don't want to be touched by the likes of you!"

Barbarus' face warped in pleasure.

"Slaves, should know their place!"

Barbarus raised his hand. If she was beaten by magic, Nephie's delicate body wouldn't offer the slightest resistance. Yet, even so, her eyes didn't leave his. And then it happened. With a thunderous roar, the stone wall was pulverised.

"W-what on earth!?"

A man slowly appeared from the dust clouds, in front of a flustered Barbarus. A voice came from him with an appreciative sound.

"Well said, Nephie. That's exactly why you're my student."

Her master, the one she wanted to see more than anyone, was standing there.



"Yo, Barbarus, it's been about a week, right?"

Zagan spoke friendlily, just like always. Barbarus' face stiffened instantly. After Manuela had arrived, Zagan had come straight here. He knew all of Barbarus' safe houses, and then restricted them to the ones he could escape to from Kianoides. There were several candidates, but he'd intended to go through all of them, it was his good luck that he found Nephie in the first one he checked.

"U-umm, Mr mage, are you okay? I heard that it was a stupidly bad idea to invade another mage's territory."

Manuela timidly opened her mouth from behind Zagan, but he just shrugged his shoulders. Incidentally, the three knights were in no fit state to fight, so he had left them outside. As if that had given him some of his calm back, Barbarus focused on Zagan.

"...When... did you realise?"

Barbarus had probably resolved not to ask anything like 'why are you here'. Zagan scratched the back of his neck and answered.

"It was more or less because I thought Face Skinner showing up was strange I guess?"

That was the mage that had attacked Chastel.

That reminds me, is she around here too?

He looked around for her and found her bound to the wall... He pitied her a little, because she was a holy knight always losing to mages. That aside, he returned his gaze to Barbarus.

"When I went to go send her outside, you came along as if to check the bounded fields. It'd be bizarre not to doubt that, wouldn't it?"

He was sure when they talked about the Demon Lords, but he'd had doubts for a long time. He just hadn't put it into words because he didn't care. It wasn't that Barbarus didn't feel friendship, but that had nothing to do with not betraying Zagan. Barbarus had an expression of surprise.

"But you still accepted the invitation to the auction?"

"I was curious what you were planning. Plus, I was interested in the Demon Lord's legacy anyway."

Looking at the results, it was because of him that Zagan had met Nepheie, so from that point of view, he was grateful even now.

Zagan gave a tight smile and said. "Before that." And then continued.

"You hurt Nepheie, didn't you?"

The ground broke. Zagan's simple step forwards broke the bedrock.

"Hck."

By the time Barbarus had put himself on guard, Zagan was standing right in front of him.

"You damned-"

"First, an arm."

Zagan swung Barbarus' arm, that he had raised, perhaps to cast some kind of magic. With an unpleasant wrenching noise, it bent in the wrong direction.

"Kch?"

"Next, a leg."

This time, he mercilessly swept at Barbarus' knee as he let out a strangled cry. No, it wasn't quite right to call it a sweep. He had kicked diagonally down into his knee, and that single attack had pulverised the joint.

"Aarrgh!"

Barbarus swooned, foaming at the mouth. It was a scant few seconds since

Zagan had stepped forward. With a backwards glance at his buddy, who had fallen on the floor like a caterpillar, his limbs shattered, Zagan fell to his knees in front of Nephie. He tore off the cuffs with brute strength, and next went to remove the collar. This collar was different than her previous one, it was nothing special and he could just rip it off. Confirming that there was nothing restraining her anymore, Zagan finally looked at her face. Her snow white hair was dirtied, and her eyes swam with tears.

"Ahh... Did it... hurt?"

"...It... hurt."

"I guess so... Sorry."

She gently hit his chest.

"It seemed you... were hurt more than me, master."

"...I was?"

Tears spilt from her eyes.

"I didn't know if anything happened to you, and if you said I wasn't necessary, I thought I should accept that. But..."

Nephie tightly gripped at his chest.

"I couldn't stay calm when you were hurting, master!"

It was the first time he had heard Nephie shout so loudly.

"I looked like I was hurt?"

"You did."

"If I had to say, I was the one doing the hurting, but..."

"That's a separate thing than if I was hurt by you."

"...So you were... hurt?"

"Don't change the subject please."

Nephie was rather relentless today. Not letting go of him, Nephie looked up at his face.

"Don't leave yourself alone, master."

Slowly, a warmth filled his chest.

I left you alone though?

And yet, rather than resent him, she said that. The feelings of wanting to hug her back, seemed too good for him now.

“Nephie...”



There was something he had to tell her more than anything, and it was when he opened his mouth to put it into words that it happened.

"You bastard, you think you've won without finishing it!?"

Barbarus stood, he had probably healed his limbs. At his feet, a blood red magic circle spread out.

"Master!"

Nephie screamed, but Zagan calmly stroked her head.

"Don't worry, nothing will happen."

"Wha-?"

Just like Zagan had said, the magic circle did nothing. It wasn't that Barbarus' magic hadn't activated, but nothing happened despite that.

"What... happened...?"

Zagan spoke to Nephie, who had a puzzled expression.

"Before, we talked about a theoretically strongest mage, right?" Adding circuits to the inside of a magic circle would break the laws of magic. It existed in theory, but it was just academic gossip, impossible to enact. "There's actually some kind of trick that makes it possible." He ran his finger through the air, drawing the same circle that was at their feet. "If it's the exact same circle as someone else, you can add to it from the inside. If you do that, something like resonance occurs to the magic."

The first time he used magic was when he was eight-years-old. At the time, the vagrant Zagan had been captured as a sacrifice by Resentment Andras. Zagan had already known what it would mean to be captured by a mage when he didn't even know his own identity. So he remembered the magic circle when he was captured, and stealthily drawn it on his arm. Because he had nothing to draw with, he had used his own blood. Thinking back on it, it was a child's shallow wit. An amateur imitating the form shouldn't have been able to use magic.

And yet, Zagan's magic had worked. He had ran, and was found by Andras, who tried to kill him. Against the oncoming lightning, Zagan had used the same magic. It was probably a coincidence. Using the same magic with only a slight delay had made the resonating magic rebound on Andras.

It wasn't as simple as it sounded. Simply using the same magic would cause them both to go off and rebound, and in the first place, you wouldn't activate it in time. Being able to use the same magic in a fraction of a second was a miracle. Zagan had killed Andras like that. That was Zagan's unique magic — the power that the twelve Demon Lords chose for their sworn friend.

Barbarus fell back.

"I-impossible... Is that, the legacy of Andras?"

"Andras...? Ahh, yeah, he did exist. He could pull this stunt off too?"

He had died unexpectedly easily for that. Barbarus probably knew that was wrong, as he went pale.

"W-what the hell are youuuu!?"

Barbarus fired magic at random, half-crazed. They were within his bounded fields, Barbarus' power was raised to its utmost limits, and Zagan's power was conversely weakened considerably. Regardless, not a single piece of Barbarus' magic reached Zagan, they disappeared just before him. He repeatedly drew the same magic circles as Barbarus and 'resonated' them. He did so in an instant, even for magic he was seeing for the first time. If there were talents, this would be Zagan's talent with magic.

Nephie murmured in shock.

"But, why does nothing happen then? Overlaying the same magic would cause the magic itself to be activated..."

"Well spotted, Nephie."

Zagan honestly praised his student, who showed her superior insight.

"What I just said is something even a beginner can do if their timing is there. You need to develop magic, don't you?"

The 'resonance' that Zagan first learnt was the reflection of magic. It was when he had wondered whether that magic could be sublimated into something else rather than reflected that Zagan's research as a mage had begun. Finally, he succeeded in converting the magic that he had resonated into his own mana. Zagan spread his robe out over his arms. On his right arm, there

were many magic circles in rows. They were all active, with mana circling through them.

“Can you see it? These are all converting the magic that Barbarus is throwing around.” In other words, they were magic absorbers. Casting magic itself gave Zagan power. Even the Demon Lords couldn’t kill Zagan with magic. This was the magic that had made him into a Demon Lord. “Though that said, I still can’t convert it into anything other than my speciality. I still need to develop it so I can use it for anything.”

It was still too unrefined to be called complete. That was why the Demon Lords had called him weak.

Barbarus’ face twisted in surprise.

“You’re feasting on my magic?”

He was a first class mage too, realising that at a glance. The magic that Zagan specialised in was strengthening his body. He ‘resonated’ other magic and turned it into his own body’s strength. It was certainly reasonable to call it feasting.

Then, he suddenly remembered something.

“Oh yeah, Barbarus, I was finally given a title.

He clenched his right fist. The magic circles coiled around his arm glowed and spun.

“The Mage Killer, that’s my title.”

And then, he punched him.

Barbarus probably did something to defend against it. However, having all magic absorbed by Zagan, even if they strengthened their body, there wasn’t a mage that could beat Zagan in doing so. In other words, there wasn’t a mage that could block a punch from Zagan. Not even the Demon Lords.

“Geck.”

Zagan’s fist sank into Barbarus’ stomach, and he felt his organs rupture, and even his spine being crushed. Barbarus doubled over and was flung backwards, rolling twice, three times through the magic circle in the wide open space. He

heaved blood and twitched on the floor.

"W-wait. It's my... loss. I can't fight. I won't show myself... in front of you... again... I swear. I'll give you all my knowledge." Zagan clenched his fist at Barbarus begging for his life. The number of circles coiled around his arm had decreased for some reason, but some still remained. Barbarus' face paled. "Zagan, we're... friends... right?"

At those pitiful words, Zagan tilted his head with a serious expression.

"Do mages have the concept of friendship?"

And then, swung his fist down.

The bedrock shattered, the magic circle vanished without a trace. The destruction didn't stop at the floor, and spread to the stone walls and ceiling. The cracks encroached around the chains holding Chastel, and unfastened them. That attack would completely obliterate Barbarus... or so it should have.

"A-a, babababa..."

Barbarus had his eyes completely wide and reached out. Zagan's fist had hit the ground right next to his face. Zagan broke out into laughter at his buddy's expression.

"Hahaha, I'm joking. Don't be so scared."

"W-wha...? What are you doing?"

Zagan shrugged.

"Well, I don't really need to kill you, and if I do, I won't be able to get any tasty booze, I'm not exactly knowledgeable on that."

"Are you pitying me... ugh."

"I can afford something like this with no trouble."

Barbarus glared at Zagan.

"Don't mess around... If you let me live, I'll definitely kill you. I will! I won't give up until you're dead."

"I don't mind. Each time you lose, I'll have you tribute some tasty booze."

Barbarus' eyes opened wide, uncomprehending.

"What the hell are you on about? What gain does letting an enemy live give you."

"Ahh, about that..." Zagan clapped his hands as if he'd forgotten. "Barbarus, I became a Demon Lord." Barbarus grit his teeth in anger, and Zagan continued when he saw that. "Don't you think a Demon Lord worrying about the customs and rules is ridiculous?"

The twelve Demon Lords were terrifyingly strong. He could keenly feel that they were the destination of all mages when he faced them. He had thought it fear.

It's no joke.

Why had he made that mistake? Had Zagan not grown stronger because he wanted to live? Had he not sought strength because he disliked being persecuted? Using that strength to overpower others was nothing less than a betrayal of himself.

And I even hurt Nephie like that.

Zagan wasn't perceptive enough to be able to remain the sore loser. So he grandly proclaimed.

"I'll behave how I like. If Nephie wants to live under the sun's light, then I just need to control that too."

He once more looked down at Barbarus.

"So I won't kill even you. That's what I decided, if I dislike something, I'll show my strength by just subduing it."

Exhausted, Barbarus collapsed completely. It wasn't just his strength, he mentally accepted his defeat. That was, in its true meaning, the deciding moment.

"You cocky bastard."

"Yeah, damn right. What's the point in being a Demon Lord with no pride?"

He replied with a smile.

The huge magic circle that should have been destroyed began to glow weakly.

“...Oi, are you going to carry on, Barbarus?”

With a shocked face as you might expect, Barbarus shook his head.

“N-no, this isn’t me.”

Zagan looked at where he had punched. It was right in the centre of the circle, and Zagan’s magic resonated with others, he might have unconsciously interfered with this circle.

What? It’s gathering a strange mana?

It was an amount that even Zagan couldn’t absorb. It was hard to admit, but it was more than a person could stand.

“...What were you trying to do?”

Barbarus’ face had stiffened.

“It should have been to summon real demons.”

There was a theory that the symbols used for magic and by the church were left in ancient times by the gods and demons.

Can you even call forth those ‘real’ ones?

It was an abyss of magic, that Zagan, young as he was, didn’t know.

He shouted.

“Nephie, run! Manuela, you lot too!”

But he knew it was an impossible demand. The cave was shaking so much it might collapse, rather than the cracks from Zagan’s attack, it was the power of this circle. The ceiling started to collapse, and it was hard to even stand, let alone run.

“Kuh, what’s happening?”

Even so, Chastel had managed to crawl to Nephie, and covered her as if to protect her. She definitely was a knight. Even with her wings, Manuela couldn’t fly in such an enclosed space, and was unable to move.

There’s nothing else for it.

He didn't know what would appear, but he would have to face it.

And thus, it appeared in the centre of the circle.

Zagan instantly understood his own conceit.

Perhaps it was because the circle was incomplete, or sheer coincidence, but a 'shadow', with no definite, form appeared. Zagan was terrified of that shadow.

It's impossible. Humans can't stand against that.

His breath caught. Even standing before the twelve Demon Lords, he hadn't felt this overwhelmed. Nephie paled and shook, Chastel blacked out, unable to take it, and Manuela covered her face and cowered.

This... is a demon...!?

Zagan had been given the title of Mage Killer, but in the end, did this monster wield magic? Even if it did, Zagan probably wouldn't be able to match its throughput.

It was impossible.

However much power they gained, humans couldn't become gods. It was just as he resolved himself to his death. The monster suddenly knelt. Almost as if it were waiting upon Zagan. And then it spoke.

"My King, give your orders."

For some reason, a monster beyond human comprehension was serving him. He noticed a symbol upon his fist.

The Carved Seal of the Demon Lord that he had inherited, the monster was waiting upon it.

What the hell have I obtained?

The name of Demon Lord held far too much power to be called a mere title.

Epilogue

The long night broke, and the morning sun rose into the sky. The monster had returned in accordance with Zagan's order. He didn't know where it had been summoned from, but they lived somewhere else. The cave had soon begun to collapse after that, and Zagan had taken Nephie, Chastel, Manuela, and even Barbarus, and had to escape. Well, he thought they'd made it in plenty of time.

In truth, they shouldn't have made it, but when hope seemed lost, the three knights had rushed in, ready to die. Thanks to them taking Chastel and Manuela, they made it. Zagan hadn't believed they would be useful, but in their last moments, they really had been.

...Well, they'd done it while shouting about how they were doing it because:

"We are just focusing on lady Chastel and the townsperson's safety, we aren't overlooking co-operating with an evil mage in the slightest!"

They had taken Chastel like that, and even recovered the holy sword that Barbarus had taken. In the end, he hadn't had the opportunity to talk to her after she lost consciousness. Manuela also returned home alongside Chastel, leaving these meddling words behind:

"We'll definitely be talking about this alone, right?"

And thus, the three of them, Zagan, Nephie, and Barbarus were left gazing at the collapsed cave. As they looked at the wreckage of rock, Zagan asked Barbarus.

"Well, what shall we do? Shall we continue?"

"...Huh, what are you on about after facing that monster?"

Somehow or other, Zagan had taken that monster — he still wasn't sure whether it should be called a 'demon' — into his service, and it seemed like that had broken even Barbarus' enmity.

"So, what was it? You were going to apologise with some tasty booze, right?"

"Yeah, look forward to a top-class drink."

"Right, right."

Barbarus recovered enough that he could stand, and then left for somewhere. He was probably once more planning how to take Zagan's head. But, that was fine. He was indeed a man like that — but that hardly warranted his death — he had a side to him that was difficult to dislike. And so, he let him live.

And then, Zagan was finally alone with Nephie.

What should I do, how do I bring it up?

In this past half a month, he had become much more capable of a face to face conversation, but he wasn't sure how to start one again, and at any rate, not even a day had passed since he had hurt Nephie and turned her away. Sweat gathered on his brow, but the first one to speak was Nephie.

"Master, I want to be by your side."

"...Are you sure? I said that to you, don't force yourself."

"You're fine, master."

Zagan might have been charmed by her.

What, she's gotten stronger, hasn't she?

Much more than Zagan, who fidgeted at telling her a single phrase. He looked back at her, troubled.

"But it won't be like before."

"...It won't?"

"Yeah, it won't."

Zagan knelt before her and looked straight into her deep-blue eyes. He had to tell her something. That she wouldn't be alone anymore. Even if he had to use all his might as a Demon Lord to protect her. So he wanted her to stay by his side, always. And more than anything —

I like Nephie, I love her.

He would beg her to come back after he had sent her away and hurt her once. He had to convey those feelings to her, but couldn't put them to words. He took a quiet breath, and opened his mouth.

"I want you to call me by my name, not 'master'."

Nephie's eyes went wide.

"Do I have to?"

"Yeah, you do. If you call me master, it will be like you're always just a slave, and I'm just your owner." Nephie's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "I don't want a slave, an attendant, or a student, I want that kind of relationship."

"T-that kind...?"

Her pointed ears shook rapidly. Zagan opened his mouth, and as his voice shook, said.

"The kind where I... I...o..."

"I love you."

Those simple words caught in his throat, and he couldn't say them. His throat dried up and he couldn't speak, and his knees shook, more than Barbarus' did when he kicked him, more than Zagan had when he faced that demon. At the end of his conflict, what left his mouth were these words.

"You are mine. Always, for our whole lives, until one of us dies, no, even if we die!"

He spoke, and then slumped in dejection.

Why can't I just tell her that I love her!?

That he had fallen for her when he first lay eyes on her. That he wanted her to like him, and that he had been moving around in a daze for this last fortnight. That he'd hurt her simply because he was a coward. Even though he wanted to lay all those feelings bare, Zagan couldn't. As tears welled up in his eyes at his own powerlessness, Nephie answered like always.

"Right!"

And nodded like always —

and then gave a smile, like a blooming flower.

Nephie... smiled...

It was the first time Zagan had seen that expression. He couldn't help but be taken in by it, and Nephie took out the remnants of her collar. It had been around her neck until a scant few hours ago. And because the key was used, it hadn't been destroyed.

"Would you, put this on me again, please?"

"Wait, that's obviously not okay, that's a slave's..."

Nephie placed her index finger against Zagan's lips as he spoke.

"This is fine. Master..." Nephie stopped, troubled, in the middle of her sentence. "Zagan-sama, this is what first connected us, isn't it?"

Zagan took the collar he had once removed. He hadn't been able to tell her his feelings, and yet, Nephie had asked him to replace the collar. Almost like a promise ring.

It was a rather disturbing ring to call an engagement ring though. Yet it was without a doubt 'proof' to them.

"Sure, I get it."

Zagan once more put the collar around her neck. It looked like a disgusting lump of metal, that sealed Nephie's magic, and enslaved her. But between them both, it held the exact opposite meaning. Then, Nephie tilted her head in question.

"Um, Zagan-sama?"

"What?"

"What exactly would a relationship that isn't a slave, an attendant, or a student be?"

Zagan's face stiffened.

That's what I'd like to ask!

Zagan couldn't just say 'I want to be lovers' and suffered silently.

I, a Demon Lord, took a slave elf as my wife, but how do I love her?

He prayed from the bottom of his heart for someone to tell him.

Afterword

Hello everyone, this is my first time with HJ Bunko, and ‘I, the Demon Lord, Took a Slave Elf as my Wife, but how do I Love Her?’ has been delivered to you. I am Teshima Fuminori.

This is the tale of the meeting between a man that walks a cruel life while gaining vast power and a beautiful girl, a great work of a pure love-drama as they strengthen their bonds (there’s an error in here).

Well, leaving the jokes aside, it’s an over the top fantasy for old time’s sake. There are swords and magic, elves and winged people, and things like beast-eared therianthropes. There’s even gods and Demon Lords, and maybe even demons. The currency is gold and silver, and if you’re out of money, you can act as a highwayman.

A boy comes to know that there are things you can’t get by force when he falls for an elf girl at first sight. That’s right, a mage that coops himself up inside a dingy lab doesn’t have any abilities to communicate. It’s hard to just watch over that pitiful first love. RPG type alternate world fantasies have probably been around for a few years, they’re kind of nostalgic, and kind of embarrassing, they’re rather conflicted feelings.

Talking of old times, COMTA-san, who is in charge of the illustrations for this was actually also in charge of the illustrations for *Shadow Butler Mark’s Blunders*, it’s the second time we’ve been paired up.

Thanks to that, as far as I know of quality and the like, I have a sense of security, and I’m thankful for that lack of anxiety.

As for my plans for the future, first, volume two of Desktop Army ‘*Desktop Army The Pied Piper of Hamelin*’ will go on sale this February.

Next, I’ve been put in charge of the novelisation of an anime that airs in the spring, *Frame Arm Girls*, and that should be on sale in April from Famitsu Bunko. I’ve also got another work ready to be published by Famitsu Bunko that should come out around the same time I think.

My thanks to everyone that has supported me this time.

To K-sama for all the advice in the planning of this book, to COMTA-sama for drawing up such wonderful illustrations, to everyone that helped with the cover design, proofreading, and publicising, to my children that have recently been making me omurice, and to you that picked up this book in the bookstore.

Thank you!

January 2017, Teshima Fuminori, building plastic models at night.

Atelier Moon Window Annexe: <http://teshima.exblog.jp/>